

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

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The thesis was primarily aimed at interpretation of rock art of India, and after the entire study it can be definitely concluded that the content of the vast corpus of rock art available in India was much more than a thing of beauty. It was mostly intended towards compelling Nature to work for man. In a mysterious and dangerous world when man was far from the light of education, drawing or engraving pictures on cave walls was aimed to solve all problems and achieve overall good for the tribes. However in practice this is impossible to prove.

The only way in which interpretation of rock art of a given area can be done is from ethnographic parallels from the area of study, mostly from tribes who still practice this art form. Unfortunately as already discussed in the thesis, though wall paintings in houses along with some other forms of tribal art do exist in India, but none of the tribal communities today are known to practice any kind of art in rock shelter or caverns. Therefore under such circumstances I had to fall back on communities outside India who have practiced rock art until recently like the San of South Africa (till the second half of the 19th century), Chumash community of North America, Aborigines from Australia and others to primarily understand the purpose behind making of rock art. On doing so I have found that this art form were mostly to serve as a tool to solve the daily problems faced by a particular tribe, who in turn usually took help of a priest cum doctor called shaman (Local names vary from place to place). These problems can be anything ranging from getting a better hunt, curing the sick, bringing in rain, better harvest, fertility rituals and so on. In other words it was to achieve overall good for the individual or tribe by paying homage to ancestor spirits as well as warding off evil spirits. The shaman who acts as an intermediary is believed to possess special powers that enable him/her to establish contact with spirits (mostly ancestors). In this regard as per details provided by San shamans from South Africa, the walls of the rock shelters are considered to be a veil between the real world and spirit realm. These shelters were therefore painted with motifs that were to become gateways for ordinary people to access realms that they could not visit otherwise (Williams 2002a:149). Along with this a thorough study on rock art

from all corners of the world has revealed that almost everywhere it was made to serve some purpose.

Now, though the nature of rock art varies from one part of the world to another, there are few basic elements which are commonly seen in any rock art of any given area. I have counted on these common elements and tried to draw parallels from sources available from different area in the world. Firstly, geometric designs are found almost in any rock art region. Indian rock art is no exception and display a great variety of intricate designs as well as concentric circles, spirals with their variations and intermediate forms including several geometric motifs. They are believed to be the earliest for generally figurative rock art, is found to be superimposed over the geometric designs also known as pre-figurative art. We have also seen in the thesis that in ethnographic accounts obtained from communities who practiced rock art, it was found that making of their rock art was part of some ancient ritual involving shamans who would often go into trance or an altered state. Based on this David Lewis Williams in 2002 developed a neuropsychological model for classifying and addressing Upper Palaeolithic signs that is otherwise not available from simplistic ethnographic analogy. Infact he along with T.A Dowson wished to develop this model from 1988 onwards (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988:201). According to this model, which is based upon images formed by the human optic system during altered states of consciousness there are three states of consciousness. This experiment was tested on ordinary individuals in laboratory. It was found that in the lightest stage people witness geometric visual percepts that include dots, grids, zigzags, nested catenary curves and meandering lines (Williams 2002a, 126). Known as phosphenes, form constants or entoptic phenomenon, these can occur to all people irrespective of geographical or cultural backgrounds, as these percepts are wired into the human nervous system. Now, evidence of phosphene like symbols like spirals, zigzags, dots, grids, curves and hexagonal patterns are found in rock art of India. Subsequently, there are plenty of examples where geometric designs have been placed on animal as well as human figures in rock art from India. This is very similar to stage three of the neuropsychological model when individual witnesses a feeling of a vortex or rotating tunnel around them and while in this state they start seeing iconic images which

are derived from memory and are often associated with powerful emotional experiences (Siegel and Jarvik 1975:128). Even in this essentially iconic stage, entoptic phenomenon may persist and iconic imagery may be projected against a background of geometric forms or entoptic phenomenon may frame iconic imagery (Kluver 1942: 181,182). Therefore the large number of animal or female figures with intricate designs as part of body decoration in rock art of India is same as stage three of the neuropsychological model. This could be done based on ethnographic accounts obtained from various tribes of India who attest the presence of shamans even now, even though the practice of rock art may have become extinct. In terms of relevance the best example is obtained from the Saura's of Orissa who confirm that the prime idea behind their art is to satisfy the ancestor spirits as well as God. Apart from the above mentioned geometric shapes, the triangle shaped engravings resembling the vulva which have been found plenty in rock art of Orissa along with other parts of the country is most certainly representation of the woman herself and concept of fertility. Evidences obtained from Baghor I in Son Valley, Madhya Pradesh, India (Kenoyer et. al.1983) also support this interpretation. Even today the members of local Koli and Bhaiga tribes worship similar type of colourful natural stones as a symbol of the female principle or Mother Goddess called 'mai' in the local language(Sonawane 1997;13-14). Infact the triangle motif is part of a universal system of symbols that persist through time and across space. Natural formations as well as those that are enhanced or entirely sculpted are considered sources of power and were used in fertility rituals (McGowan 1982). Again in South India basic geometrical designs with slightly varying marks and 'bijaksaras' serve as 'yamtras' for numerous purposes with psychic significance and approach. Even deities are represented by geometrical designs known as 'mandalas' for example Ganesha mandala which is two overlapping equilateral triangles in opposite directions. Geometric motifs are believed to bear a magical significance for it is believed that an engraving of a six knot design has the power to cure cattle off their diseases (Sundara 2002, 51-56). Moreover it was found that mazes and labyrinths are one of the world's most enduring symbols and it is found in many forms and in many countries. It has been seen that Mazes have been used in many fertility rituals and also it has been linked with death and rebirth in many cultures in different parts of the world.

The thesis also throws light on certain features that need to be taken into consideration while viewing rock art. Almost any rock art representation in India exhibits peculiarities which point to a certain mystic aura involved in its depiction. For example, evidence of phosphene-like signs is noticed along with the iconic images in many of the paintings. Also, many images appear to be in a floating state and not grounded. They are placed without regard to size or position relative to one another. Some of the animals are shown with cloven feet which indicate that they are not standing on the ground. Animals with raised tails are also seen in India which have been interpreted (in Lascaux, France) to be metaphors indicating an altered state. Moreover, many of the animal figures were probably occasioned as a form of totem/clan symbol. Human figures too portray several details which add to the numinous aspect. Like figures with raised arms, elaborate head dress (very common accessory used by a shaman), multi-armed multi-legged human figures, bent body postures, X-ray depictions, prominent depiction of muscles, lines radiating from head and arms, ithyphallic figures, elongated figures / elongated arms and so on. All these aspects have been taken into consideration. The thesis therefore points to those minute details seen in rock art of India which become crucial in its interpretation. Superimpositions further corroborate the fact that the walls of the rock shelter were for ritual use and a particular place was perhaps considered especially potent with supernatural powers. Hand prints which are also a universal occurrence in rock art are probably related to ritual touching of the walls of the rock shelter.

Amongst activities depicting gatherings or group activities in rock art of India, scenes of honey collection are seen. In these paintings, bees swarming over honeycombs are represented. Apart from conveying the profane act of collecting honey, such depictions, according to Erwin Neumayer, 'suggest a closer relation between the mythology of rising of the shaman and the bees, which is also manifested in many Central Indian tribal myths' (Neumayer 1993, 248). In fact, I have found reference of the 'Ras-Nawa' festival which is celebrated amongst the 'Baiga' tribes of Mandla district of Madhya Pradesh which means ceremonial eating of honey. Interestingly, it was found that still shamans are involved in this festival. Moreover, another interpretation offered regarding presence of

honey combs in rock art is based on the neuropsychological model. According to this model an altered state of consciousness causes all the senses, to hallucinate, not just sight for which an individual who passes through this will witness a buzzing or humming sound along with flickering visual hallucinations of navicular entoptic phenomenon. Therefore the individual feels that they are both seeing and hearing bees swarming over honeycombs. This essentially remains constant cross-culturally for it is neurologically determined.

Depiction of plants in rock art may have had some spiritual life significance too. Often it has been found in rock art of North America representation of plants like Datura, Peyote and certain kinds of mushrooms. According to researchers like Carolyn E. Boyd Datura motif represents the use of the plant by shamans for its medical and hallucinogenic properties. Infact, researchers have documented more than 50 hallucinogenic plants used by Native Americans. Similarly it was found that, according to the Indian mythology Soma (ambrosia) is simultaneously a sacred hallucinogenic plant used in ancient Hindu secret rituals mentioned in the Vedas, a personified God, and an important cosmological principle.

Finally, it was found that shamanism is still deep rooted in the tribal belief system in India and it is still manifested in many of their rituals. Infact the art traditions that are practiced by the Gonds, Muria's, Garsia's, Nagas etc are symbolic mostly intended towards appeasing ancestor souls or to guard off evil spirits. Most importantly the ritual paintings made by Sauras have been found to have direct link with shamanism.

Therefore to conclude the study, the interpretive framework employed to the cognitive content of Indian rock art primarily revolves around three aspects, which are ancient rituals, fertility and mythology. However this understanding is only on a deeper level for we can never try to understand rock art with the aesthetic tool of our culture. Also we should not imagine that this system of representation was everywhere inspired by the same perceived needs and cultural bodies of ideas. A global perspective on rock art interpretation was attempted for we have seen some cultures still continue with this art

form and are well known, while some are almost blank. This study therefore underlines the extent of challenge that lies for future generations who intend to carry on interpretation of rock art of India.