

# **SYNOPSIS**

## COGNITIVE CONTENT OF INDIAN ROCK ART

### SYNOPSIS

'Rock art' consisting of paintings and engravings in caverns, rocks and boulders is one of the earliest form of human visual expressions. It is a universal phenomenon and numerous researchers work in this field all over the world. Though study of rock art had begun quite early in India (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), until recently study of this enormous visual record of human presence was confined amongst a handful scholars and largely treated as something apart by archaeologists and historians. However slowly this subject is gaining importance, thanks to the efforts made by the members of the Rock Art Society of India. Ever since its inception in 1990 it is organizing regular seminars, conferences and exhibitions to promote Indian rock art heritage both amongst scholars in various fields as well as general mass. In the west it is already a well established discipline, infact slowly emerging to be a multidisciplinary subject. Regarding the circumstances for which rock art occurs, various proposals have been made concerning its meaning and functions. In India a lot remains to be done regarding interpretation of rock art. It is one of the three countries having the richest treasure of rock art in the world. This study is therefore aimed at interpreting rock art of India on the lines of recent scientific explanations propounded by western researchers as well as present ethnic culture (including mythologies) of tribes in India and elsewhere in the world. Rock art is a global phenomenon which starts from Upper Palaeolithic, gradually continues in the hunting gathering societies to times when societies were based on agriculture and animal husbandry and then to historic times. Different areas in the world have in common some general trends but they also have significant local characters.

In India, research has been undertaken by specialists on various aspects related to rock art like dating, pigment analysis, faunal floral remains, categorizing images, distribution pattern, reporting new sites and so on. However a comprehensive work speculating solely the meaning of rock art of India was felt necessary by the author. A thorough study on

rock art from all corners of the world has revealed that making of rock art was to serve some purpose, probably it had many functions. It had links with shamanism, totemism, astronomy, hunting magic and also used in fertility rituals. The study reveals that primarily rock art had links with shamanism, infact in the west it has been propounded as a hypothesis (mainly by David Williams) to explain cave art.

This thesis tries to examine the basis of this hypothesis and searches for evidences to see whether this is applicable in interpreting Indian rock art or not. Rock art is a global phenomenon and certain themes are common irrespective of the region where it occurs. During the course of the study ethnographic case studies from some parts of India has revealed that shamanism is a common practice amongst tribes of India and even today some of these shamanistic activities lead to creation of images which have spiritual connotations.

### **Aim and Objectives**

The aim of this work is to test, primarily the theories of shamanism and entoptic phenomena (model established through laboratory research by Williams and Dowson) as a tool for explaining Indian rock art. Certain themes are common to shamanistic practices all over the world and interestingly those themes occur in Indian rock art too. Along with shamanism some more uses of rock art put forward by researchers are totemistic rituals (Layton 2000:179), hunting magic (Turpin 1992:295), fertility rituals and recording of astronomical events (Plog 1997:101) which has also been taken into consideration. Since the rock art of any given area may reflect more than one theme or cultural affiliation, two or more interpretations may apply.

In the thesis the author attempts to bring together all the relevant material for means of comparison, to outline each possible hypothesis thereby suggesting a theory for explanation of some of the motifs and in the process probably gaining a better insight into the uses of rock art and also its significance in India. Certain recurring themes like the (a) Geometric forms consisting of zigzags, dots, triangles, spirals, curves (b) many instances of surreal situations which include depicting an animal/humans in x-ray form or upside

down (c) there are human figures, combining features of human and animal (d) there are many examples of superimpositions where an artist has put his image on top of another depiction and finally (e) bees and bee-hives occurring in various rock shelters all over the world. These are associated with shamanism, potency and entoptic phenomenon (concepts have been dealt in detail in the thesis). Joseph Campbell, the great mythographer, has shown that there are a number of key features which distinguish a shaman's art. These include: ritual dance, the possession of a wand or staff, ecstatic trance, the wearing of animal costume, identification with a bird, stag, or bull, becoming master of game animals and initiations, and the control of a magical animal or familiar. Similar themes are very much present in Indian rock art which are therefore crucial to the interpretation of the rock art. This observation has been supported by examples throughout the course of the thesis.

The study will begin with a summary of Lewis-Williams (2000) theory and then explore evidences to see how this corresponds to the Indian framework. According to Williams the explanations for the origin of image making lies in the evolution of the human mind. He argues that our ancestors possessed a more advanced neurological make-up, enabling them to experience **shamanistic trances** and **vivid mental imagery**. It then becomes important for these people to 'fix' or paint these images on cave walls which they perceived as a membrane between their world and the spirit world from which the visions came. Lewis-Williams's research has been based in two main areas, neuropsychological/physiological and ethnographic (San rock art, North American rock art) studies, on the basis of which he concluded that these trance states were all part of some ancient shamanistic ritual. The author will also explore other conjectures to interpret images from rock art as totem or clan symbols, astronomy, hunting magic and some as part of fertility rituals.

The outline of the thesis is as follows:

The thesis consists of four chapters.

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter deals with the history of rock art research carried out in India, for its study has a long background beginning from 1883. This is followed by a closer examination at the distribution pattern of rock art sites in India. Subsequently a relative chronology, followed by characteristic features of Indian rock art has been outlined. The aim, objectives and method of work adopted has also been discussed here.

### **Chapter 2: Shamanism and Rock Art**

This chapter tries to speculate a connection between rock art and shamanistic rituals. It begins with a summary of the theory put forward by David Williams in 2000 which describes the 'entoptic phenomenon' which is a laboratory tested model precisely describing the stages of visual hallucination. This is followed by a discussion on the relation between 'shamanism and art' which shows how shamanistic trances lead to image making and also the purpose behind such occurrences. To further understand this relation ethnographic case studies have been discussed: societies, within India and elsewhere, where there is practice of shamanism and subsequent image making is recorded like the San Bushmen of Africa, Sauras of India (Orissa), Himalayan tribal art and tribal art of Hazaribagh (Bihar). In order to address the issue of shamanism leading to the creation of rock art, recorded shamanism must also be considered. Therefore shamanistic activities (not always resulting to art) as represented in Indian ethnography are also discussed here.

### **Chapter 3: Interpretation of Rock Art**

In this chapter efforts have been made to interpret Indian rock art under various subject heads like geometric figures, animal figures, human figures, social groups, objects of transport and plants. Few pictures have been selected under respective subject heads, followed by its description and interpretation. Irrespective of the interpretation,

descriptive forms can always serve as a useful database. However the thrust of the thesis is the interpretation of rock art of India.

#### **Chapter 4: Conclusion**

This chapter sums up all the observations and indicates the significance of the entire study.

### **STATEMENT-1**

(Statement showing the particulars, on which the work is based, the discovery of new facts and of new relationship between facts observed by others and how the work tends to help the general advancement of knowledge).

The focus of this study is to interpret rock art of India. The thrust of the interpretation lies in examining whether 'shamanism' (which is already being established as a scientific hypothesis in explaining Upper Palaeolithic rock art by western scholars mainly David Williams of Witwaterstrand University of South Africa) played a role behind making of rock art in India. The author will also explore other conjectures to interpret images from rock art as totem or clan symbols, astronomy, hunting magic and some as part of fertility rituals.

- 1) The findings of this thesis are that there are functional, spiritual or ritualistic significance behind making of rock art in India.
- 2) Probably many of the paintings and engravings have spiritual connotations behind its making. They should not be simply viewed as events depicting daily lives of the people.
- 3) Along with observable reality, this vast storehouse of paintings and engravings renders spiritual reality before us.
- 4) Along with shamanism other conjectures have been explored to find the purpose behind making of rock art. Like some of it can be representation of a totem /clan symbol (animal figures), astronomy, hunting magic and some as part of fertility rituals. Ethnographic analogies from tribal groups of India as well as other parts of the world have been consulted which substantiates the above findings.
- 5) Off the numerous geometric designs and intricate patterns seen in the rock art of India, a number of them have been interpreted on the basis of David William's model called 'entoptic phenomenon' (diagram and model explained in chapter 2 of

the thesis). However the 'triangle' signs are probably symbolic representation of fertility or Mother Goddess. Inputs from Bhagavat Gita, Vedas, Upanishads, Tantric philosophies as well as Hindu mythology have been cited. References cited from other parts of the world further corroborate this observation.

- 6) Animal figures which are frequently depicted have also been interpreted in a novel manner. The animal world has much to teach us like some are excellent at adaptation, some embody strength and courage while others exude playfulness (Andrews 1993). They are believed to be carriers of potency which a shaman can harness (usually a quality identified with the totem animal). This has been supported by ethnographic sources from Australia, America and South Africa. The most important interpretation regarding the abundance of animal figures in rock art all over lies in the fact that in prehistoric cultures each animal was probably regarded as a totem, symbolic for its unique qualities. Research in social anthropology has also corroborated the fact that in a tribal society every tribe has a totem.
- 7) Based on Halverson's observations attention has also been drawn to the manner in which the images have been placed, that is many a times they are drawn 'without regard to size or position relative to one another' (Halverson 1987, 66-67). Rock art, specially the animal figures appear to be floating around, not rooted to the ground. These images are probably representations of a mental vision.
- 8) The human figures also have been interpreted on the basis of shamanism (details in chapter 3 of the thesis) specially the numerous dance scenes that congregate the gamut of rock art in India.
- 9) Superimpositions (repeated drawing one above the other in the same area) present in rock art further corroborate the fact that the shelter place might have been considered very potent with powers for which repeated drawings have been made



in the same place. Hand prints found in rock art all over the world is probably related to ritual touching of the rock surface.

- 10) Images where inner section of either an animal or human body or any other object is filled with design patterns comprising of vertical/horizontal lines or geometric shapes is indicative of intensified stages of visual imagery when an individual witnesses iconic imagery against a background of geometric forms (Siegel 1977, 134) (concepts are discussed in the thesis).
- 11) The thesis contains original pictures from Panarpani rock shelter from Panchmarhi which has not been published elsewhere.

## STATEMENT-2

(Statement showing the sources of information, the extent to which the thesis is based on the works of others and the original portion of the thesis).

The numerous photos taken from rock art sites (Madhya Pradesh) during site visits as well as published photos belonging to other parts of India, forms the main source of this study. To understand history, chronology, distribution and nature of rock art of India, relevant publications have been referred. Data on shamanism, entoptic phenomenon and related concepts for interpretation has been obtained from various books and web pages. Ethnographic data obtained from published works as well as personal interaction, is also an important source of study. Following are the list of select references.

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Various Volumes of Purakala (The Journal of the Rock Art Society of India) and Rock Art Research (The journal of the Australian Rock Art Research Association).

The entire approach adopted to interpret rock art of India in this thesis, is original. This study definitely wishes to add to the research of rock art interpretation within India and take it a step forward.