

The Rock Art traditions and Prehistoric Landscapes in the Painted Shelters Rajasthan:

Symbolic and Technical Insights

Abstract

The prehistoric rock shelters in Rajasthan with painted interiors reveal several insights into art, archaeology, and use of space. The iconography of these sites provides new information on the symbolic meaning and technical compositions of rock art, its ecological integration, and relation to memory preservation of early societies in Rajasthan. This paper compares the typologies, spatial measurements, and stylistic periods and provides archaeological interpretations of the rock shelters in Gararda, Golpur, Banka, and Sohanpur. The findings suggest how the local tradition in these places needs to be documented and included in national and global discussions on art and its meanings.

Introduction

Prehistoric art is a collection of forms of the human consciousness. Icons in paintings reflect thought processes and symbolism whose continuity can be traced over the years. The process of imitating human life in art is a process of documentation to give form to cultural and social meanings. Human thought, the psyche, layered and complex, is rendered into image through rock art. The petroglyphs of southern Africa, the cave paintings of Lascaux, and the pictographs of central India have this in common. They are able to narrate the history of life through layered rock art pictography. Such visual expression bears knowledge of spiritual, ecological, and social life, which is understandable through interpretation.

The rock art tradition of India is more than a thousand years old. These artworks are often inscribed on natural surfaces in inaccessible or liminal spaces making them difficult to uncover and also saving them from natural erosion. Those who have discovered and studied

these paintings are people who understand the dynamic between nature and prehistoric community. Early interest in rock art was seen in the Bhimbetka shelters in Madhya Pradesh which led to its recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage site, thereby, also making it a recurring canonical reference for Indian rock art. The western Indian region of Rajasthan, particularly Bundi, Bhilwara, and Karauli districts, however, contain a substantial, yet understudied, collection of painted shelters. These rock art sites feature prehistoric stone tool cultures and inscriptions.

Rock art studies in India and the world

Rock art studies as a discipline and area of interest grew in the 20th century in France, Spain, and southern Africa. Its early focus on aesthetics evolved into a more deeper study of symbolism, especially when the scholar Abbé Breuil demonstrated that the study of Paleolithic cave art was symbolic than decorative. Archaeological, ethnographic, and cognitive theories came together through interdisciplinary study to offer socio-cultural interpretations. In the later years, ritual, ecological, totemic, and mnemonic insights were drawn from indigenous knowledge systems.

The English archaeologist Archibald Carlleyle documented the painted rock shelters of Sohagighat in Mirzapur district in the 1860s. Later in the 20th century, V. S. Wakankar and M. L. K. Murty also studied rock art. Bhimbetka became a prominent site of study because the paintings covered a significant portion of the rock which had sustained its art from the Lower Paleolithic to Medieval period. Its stylistic sequencing was also of interest to scholars studying rock art. Parallel traditions such as the Vindhya, Satpura, and Aravalli ranges, including Rajasthan, show cultural ecologies and visual languages. Scholars have advocated for a regional approach that foregrounds such local adaptations.

The rock art of Rajasthan

There are ancient geological formations in the Aravalli range and the surrounding alluvial basins in Rajasthan. These sites exist close to seasonal rivers, quartzite outcrops, and plateaus with forest cover, creating an ecologically dense landscape that is a resource for symbolic meditation. The rock shelters that are painted in this region have survived across multiple prehistoric periods, first of which is the Mesolithic era (c. 10,000–3000 BCE), featuring red ochre hunting scenes, human figures and bulls, deer, and wild boar, icons that are reminiscent of a nomadic lifestyle with collective hunting rituals and environmental connections; second is the Chalcolithic era (c. 3000–1000 BCE), when the rocks began to feature abstract motifs, schematic grids, and agrarian symbolism. During this period, the rock art featured composite human-animal figures that suggests shamanic or totemic elements. The third era was the Iron Age and Early Historic Age (c. 1000 BCE–300 CE) featuring Brahmi inscriptions, processional scenes, and architectural drawings. In terms of the style of the paintings, the art appears to be naturalistic or highly abstract. There is also a frequent superimposition of figures, of white over red, which is a sign of temporal layering and evolving ritual use. The color palettes of the site and motif clusters also have differing symbolic meanings.

Gararda

There are 40 painted shelters in the quartzite hills of Gararda in Bundi. The site features red and white pictographs depicting bulls, stags, deer, and human figures. When the icons are studied as one whole image, the figures depict rows of animals, dancers, and armed figures as if in a procession or in ritualistic tradition. The shelters are around 3.5 to 5 meters long and have a height of 2 to 2.5 meters.

The orientation of the shelters is toward the slopes facing southeast. On shelter B-2, there are superimposed figures with white animals and humans painted over red outlines, suggesting that they have been repainted as part of a ritualistic process across generations. The Brahmi inscriptions present in two shelters imply continuity of such sacred practice into the early historic period. There are microlithic flakes, animal bones, and pieces of hearth associated with some shelters, indicating intermittent occupation. Garrada's complexity lies in its multiplicity: it functions as a recollection of ritual life and a palimpsest of memory cultures.

Golpur

Golpur is located on the boundary of Bundi and Bhilwara districts and contains a smaller number of shelters. The F-2 site is unique with schematic symbols, tree-like forms, and rectilinear grids. The iconography here has a balance of bulls, elephants, fish and abstract vegetal motifs. The shelters are 2.5 to 3 meters wide and approximately 2 meters in height. A perennial stream flows next to the site lending to the imagery and also suggesting representations of seasonal cycles, rituals that include the use of water, or ecological taboos. The presence of black pigment on the shelter along with the colors red and white suggest a long period of use.

The surface of the shelter is smooth and displays fewer superimpositions and spaced-out figures. This compositional clarity allows researchers to infer structured visual storytelling, perhaps linked to clan memory or initiatory rites. Golpur's ecological integrations in its rock art reflects an ecological aesthetic and symbolic connection between the environment and human life.

Banka

Banka is located in Bundi's rugged interior terrain. Several centuries ago, people in early societies drew some of the most abstract collections of rock art in this region. The imagery is not narrativized like Gararda, but instead features geometric motifs such as grids, crosshatchings, concentric circles, and minimalistic human figures. Shelters in Banka are 2 to 4 meters in length and situated on elevated portions. The presence of black and white pigment layers with the color red creates a visual composition that implies deep symbolic meaning.

Several figures in the rock art have extended limbs and forked hands depicting an exaggerated posture. This is indicative of trance states or engagement in some ritual practice. Some motifs are similar to Neolithic symbolism from sites in Gujarat and central India, which shows trans-regional dispersal of iconography. Banka's significance is in its naturalism and use of abstract form as an expression of ritualistic and spiritual practice. Here, form serves as a visual lexeme, encoding the ritualistic and spiritual meaning of the objects it portrays.

Sohanpur

Sohanpur, in the Karauli district of Rajasthan, includes a dense panel of animal motifs such as deer, bulls, horses, as well as human figures performing a ritual dance associated with weaponry or musical instruments. The shelters are 3 to 3.5 meters in length, with a height of 1.8 to 2.4 meters. As this site was close to trade routes and ancient riverbeds, there is symbolism of non-local nature and motifs, such as step-well forms and narrative bands. Within the rock art of this site is a unique feature of enclosed rectangular zones, which is interpreted as proto-temples or ritualistic enclosures. This site differs from Golpur because it demonstrates clear periods of intense repainting in red and white pigment. Although no inscriptions have been found, iconographic parallels suggest a connection to early Iron Age cultic sites in the Chambal basin.

Conclusion

The rock art and spatial features of Garrada, Golpur, Banka, and Sohanpur show the diversity and depth of prehistoric symbolic expression in Rajasthan. These shelters represent a documented ritual culture that evolved over centuries and also showed the human desire to develop ways to preserve collective memory. The rock art shelters differ from Bhimbetka's monumentalism and Ladakh's petroglyphic minimalism, to present a new form of recollection of mobility, ritual, ecology, and memory preservation as compact but symbolic compositions. Further research should prioritize the conservation of such local rock art that gives insights into the evolution of societies. 3D documentation and ethnographic engagement with local communities can also help preserve oral traditions related to these sites. As more researchers look back at Indian prehistory, the rock art of Rajasthan has a unique place in wider discussions related to art because it signifies ways in which communication began to develop symbolic coding, abstraction to signify evolution of ritual practice, ecological integration, and production of meaning through visual methods.