

Late Pleistocene art of India

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Abstract

India has produced sufficient evidence of late late-Pleistocene art, mostly in the form of mobiliary art objects. Archaeologically they are associated with an Upper Palaeolithic industry. Besides, there are some simple forms of petroglyphs and early form of dynamic dancers and animals in rock paintings. These, on the basis of circumstantial evidence, can also be assigned to that period. Thus, the late late-Pleistocene art of India presents the beginning of motif development, creation of design and ultimately that of animal and human forms. Ultimately it laid the foundation for the rich and varied tradition of Indian rock paintings in the following period. The tentative time span of Upper Palaeolithic in India is 40,000 to 10,000 yrs BP.

In India iconic art is preceded by non-iconic art, thus it follows the global phenomenon in the evolution of rock art. The present evidence indicates that transition from no-iconic to iconic art in India happened in the late late-Pleistocene period. The evidence is mostly in the form of mobiliary art and is culturally associated with Upper Palaeolithic industries. However, when considered along with early motifs, engraved designs and animals and humans discovered in the form of early petroglyphs and rock paintings, a picture of motif development, beginning of the creation of designs and animal and human forms for the first time in Indian art becomes very clear in the late late-Pleistocene period. Ultimately it laid the foundation for the rich and varied tradition of Indian rock paintings in the following period.

The tentative time span of Upper Palaeolithic in India is 40,000 to 10,000 yrs BP. It is being discussed here.

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1. Designs

The available evidence presents the development in conceiving a simple to an intricate design by hominins in the late late-Pleistocene Period, and also the skill and efficiency required to execute them in different media by different techniques.

1.1. Simple designs

Simple designs engraved on ostrich eggshell pieces were discovered from Patne in Maharashtra and Ravishankar nagar, Bhopal.

1.1.1. Evidence from Patne



Fig. 1. Ostrich eggshell piece with a simple engraved design from Patne in Maharashtra. Upper Palaeolithic.

Ostrich eggshell pieces were discovered in association with an Upper Palaeolithic industry in the excavations at Patne by S.A. Sali (1978). One of the ostrich eggshell pieces bears a simple engraved design. It is in the form of two sets of almost parallel lines with cross-hatchings in between them. The strokes of cross-hatchings are uncontrolled and come out of the parallel lines. It indicates that the artist could conceive a simple design, but was unable to execute controlled strokes to create it perfectly. The margins of the engravings show fracture marks developed because of the force of engraving. The engraved groove bears encrustation inside it (Fig. 1). It has been dated to 25,000±200 BP.

1.1.2. Evidence from Ravishankar nagar, Bhopal

Another small piece of ostrich eggshell bearing an engraved design was discovered along with an Upper Palaeolithic industry during the exploration at Ravishankarnagar, Bhopal by V.S. Wakankar (1978). It bears seven scars arranged in a pseudo oval form. The scars are deep and angular in shape. A special skill appears to have been used to execute such oblique scars on the ostrich eggshell.

1.2. Advance form of design

A fluted chalcedony core with a design engraved on its patinated cortex from Chandravati in Rajasthan is another example of Indian mobiliary art. It was discovered by V.H. Sonawane in association with a microlithic industry (Sonawane 1997). The design consists of a pair of parallel lines moving clockwise from the center forming two intertwining spiral arms. One of these arms bears a series of short diagonal lines whereas the other one has been left plain to render a foreground and background effect to enhance the visual effect of the design (Fig. 2-3). It presents an

advanced sense and skill of designing. The design has been damaged because the nodule was used later on in Mesolithic times as a core to bring out blades from it. Hence the design appears to be pre-Mesolithic or Upper Palaeolithic.

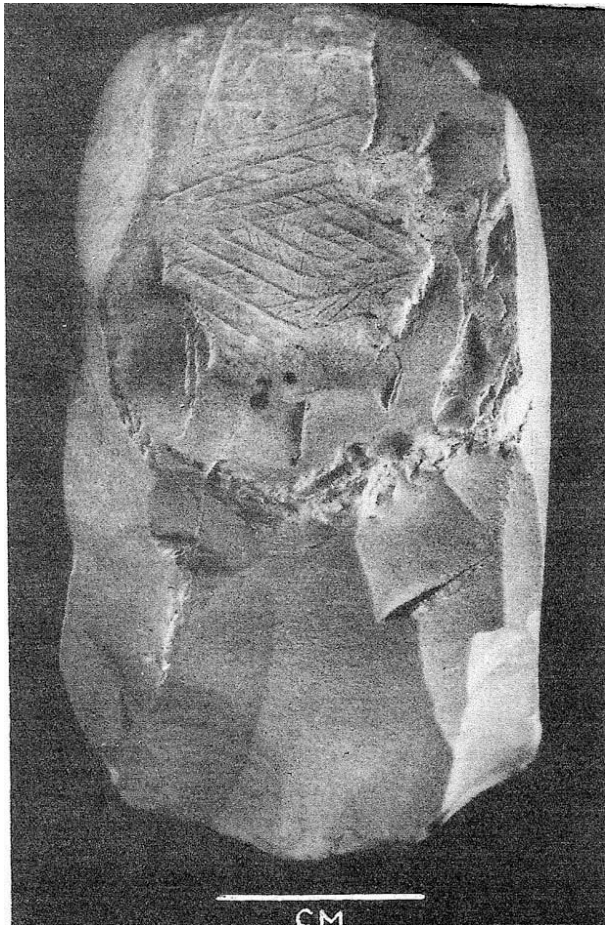
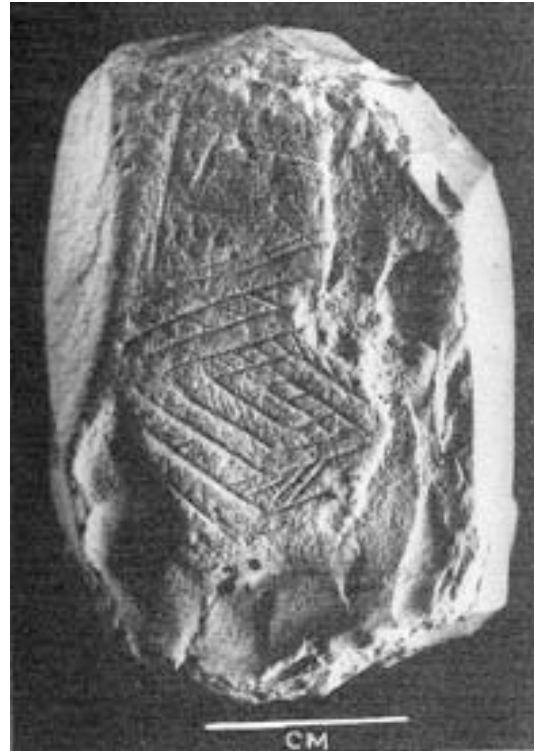


Fig. 2. (left) Advanced form of design engraved on the cortex of the fluted core from Chandravati, Rajasthan. Upper Palaeolithic.

Fig. 3. (below) Close up of the design of Fig. 2.



1.3. Simple motifs

Petroglyphs discovered at Chattaneshwar and Raisen in central India present the appearance of simple motifs for the first time in Indian rock art (Kumar 1995).

1.3.1. Chattaneshwar motif



Fig. 4. Simple oval motif with a cross inside it created with cupules on the quartzite bedrock of a rock shelter at Chattaneshwar, Rajasthan.

Nearly 70 small cupules were executed on the quartzite bedrock of a rock shelter under a big overhang at Chattaneshwar-III on the Alania river in the Chambal valley in the Kota district of Rajasthan. They are arranged in two motifs: 1. An oval form (35 x 30 cm) with a cross inside, and 2. A 'U' form with its arms curving rightward and having a small line inside at its bottom (Fig. 4). The diameter of cupules varies from 21 x 20 mm to 25.5 x 25.5 mm and their depth from 2.0 to 2.5 mm. They bear a light-brown patination.

1.3.2. Raisen motif



Fig. 5. Simple motif created with engraved petroglyphs on the quartzite bedrock of a rock shelter at Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.

Another simple geometric motif was discovered by Robert G. Bednarik, G. Kumar and G.S. Tyagi at Raisen while on a study tour in 1990 (Bednarik *et al.* 1991: 24-27). The motif was created on the quartzite bedrock of a rock shelter by engraving a circle and adding two radiating lines and two (visible) cupules to it (Fig. 5). The petroglyphs of the motif are highly patinated and smooth and appear to be one of the archaic forms of motifs in India.

1.4. Appearance of simple iconic forms

V.S. Wakankar and others, while exploring the painted rockshelters at Bhimbetka, Jaora, Kathotia, Firangi, Mahadeo, Kharwai, Bhopal, Pengawan, Chiklod, Amargarh, Raisen, Narwar, Mohammadpur etc. in the Vindhyas in Central India observed that the earliest paintings were invariably painted in a green colour, occasionally associated with a mauve red, ochre colour (Wakankar 1978; Neumayer 1983: 12-13). Both colours, particularly green, come from habitation layers yielding a Upper Palaeolithic industry represented by blades, burins, scrapers, points, obliquely fluted cores, etc. (Wakankar 1978: 5-11). These early paintings only depict human figures in the dynamic action of dancing and hunting of bovinds (Fig. 6). Animals were done naturalistically, while humans are more abstract, with the confident flow of single lines.

These early figures are generally covered with a thin layer of white encrustation on which sometimes paintings of succeeding phases of the Stone Age are also found. Therefore, Wakankar concluded that these early paintings appear to have been done in the drier phase of the Upper Palaeolithic, the terminal phase of the Pleistocene period, when ostrich still existed in India (Wakankar 1978: 5-11).

Subsequently G.S. Tyagi observed that the early dynamic dancers in green are preceded by intriguing intricate designs, a non-iconic form of rock art in Central India, particularly at Jaora (Tyagi 1992: 303-318).



Fig. 6. Dancers in a dynamic action of dance executed in simple 'S' twist forms in a green colour, superimposing an intricate design. Jaora, Madhya Pradesh.

2. Beads

Ostrich eggshell beads were discovered in Upper Palaeolithic cultural deposits at Patne in Maharashtra and Bhimbetka and Khaparkheda in Madhya Pradesh.

The excavations at Patne yielded both finished and unfinished ostrich eggshell beads. For manufacturing these beads ostrich eggshell pieces were chipped off to give them a rough circular shape. They were perforated from both sides by stone borers and their margins appear to have been smoothed by piercing them in a string and rotating them on a stone and afterwards on some soft material. The Bushmen in the Kalahari basin are still using this practice for smoothing ostrich eggshell beads (Bednarik 1990, in personal discussion).

Two finished ostrich eggshell beads were also discovered by V.S. Wakankar in the excavations at Bhimbetka from rockshelter BHIM IIIA 20 (Fig. 7). They were obtained from the neck of a human skull found in Upper Palaeolithic sediments. They are small disc beads with a smooth periphery, again perforated from both sides. Wakankar was of the opinion that the deceased person was wearing a necklace made of perishable material and that these two beads were precious items of the necklace (Wakankar 1978).

Recently an Upper Palaeolithic ostrich eggshell bead manufacturing factory site was discovered at Khaparkheda in the Narmada valley. The site was discovered and excavated by Shiela Mishra and S.B. Ota (2004). The beads represent different stages of their manufacturing. They are in the form of finished, half finished, unfinished beads and also those in the process of preparation (Fig. 8-9). They were discovered along with debitage and an Upper Palaeolithic industry on chert and chalcedony.



Fig. 7. Finished ostrich eggshell beads from Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh. Upper Palaeolithic.

The ^{14}C date obtained for the archaeological horizon yielding ostrich eggshell beads is as follows:

– Lab No. A 9446, material charcoal, date 15,680 +440/-415, calibrated date 18,723 (Mishra *et al.* 2004).

A broken big circular disc of ostrich eggshell was also found from Nagda in the Chambal valley by Giriraj Kumar in the 1970s (Kumar *et al.* 1992). Besides, other beads prepared on shells of the same age were also discovered at Patne.

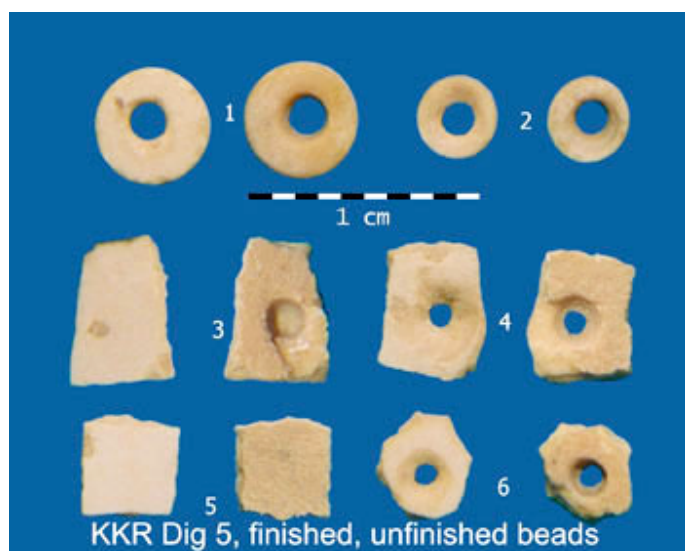


Fig. 8. Finished and unfinished ostrich eggshell beads from Khaparkheda, Narmada valley, Madhya Pradesh. Upper Palaeolithic. (Courtesy S.B. Ota.)



Fig. 9. Stone drills and unfinished ostrich eggshell beads from Khaparkheda. (Courtesy S.B. Ota.)

3. Discussion

The motifs developed from cupules and engraved lines at Chattaneshwar and Raisen represent a pioneering effort and an advanced stage of creative sense and cognitive development. A rare sense of creativity was required to develop a geometrical motif with the help of cupules and engraved lines for the first time. To reach up to this stage of creativity hominins had to undergo a long journey from creating a simple deep cupule and an engraved meandering line in the Lower Palaeolithic, through random cupule pattern, and bilinear and multilinear patterns of cupules in due course of evolution in the Pleistocene period (Kumar 2000-01; Kumar *et al.* 2005; Kumar *et al.* 2006).

Simple designs on ostrich eggshell pieces appear to represent the next stage in the evolution and development of designing sense and skill achieved by hominins. It was followed by a rhomboid design engraved on the cortex of a chalcedony nodule and intricate designs in rock paintings. These designs are complex and need an advanced sense of designing. The intricate designs are lowermost in the strata of Indian rock paintings in the Vindhya region (Tyagi 1992: 303-318) and represent the earliest form of rock paintings in India.

Further, from an artistic point of view, Ragini Roy thinks that the original concept of art and design developed in the late Pleistocene period continues in the present time in a modified form. Cupules appear to represent a pre-formative idea of the subject of sculpture, which is one of the most important streams of visual art in the modern age (Raman 1988, Plate 13-14). The cross-hatchings used in the engraved design on the patinated cortex of a chalcedony nodule from Chandravati can be compared with that of a picture of Madhubani folk art in present day Bihar (Anand 1984: 41) (Fig. 10). The composition of three early dynamic dancers superimposing the intricate designs from Jaora presents a nice example of having many pictorial elements used by modern artists to create an effective piece of art, such as that created by Krishna Hebbar (Amberkar 1960, Plate 13) (Fig. 11). What is more significant is that these works appear as spontaneous creations, coming right from the heart without any intellectual burden and impositions.

The study of 31 radiometric dates published by V.N. Misra (1989: 17-64) and Sheila Mishra (1995: 11-16) suggests that the Upper Palaeolithic in India begins sometimes around 40,000 years BP and continued up to 10,000 yrs BP. The lower limit is also corroborated by the dates of Mesolithic cultures, most of which fall within the Holocene (Misra 1989: 1-64). Some of the dates obtained on ostrich eggshells from Patne and two different levels of an early phase of Upper Palaeolithic from Chandresal are given here as they are relevant to this paper. They were obtained by the Laboratorium voor Algemene Natuurkunde Rijksuniversiteit, Groningen, Netherlands. The dates for these samples are as follows:

- Grn 7200, Patne, 25,000±200 BP (Sali 1978: 26-27)
- Grn 10638, Chandresal (Lower level), 38,000±700 BP
- Grn 10639, Chandresal (Upper level), 36,550±600 BP (Mook, pers. communication to V.S. Wakankar, 6 Sept. 1982).

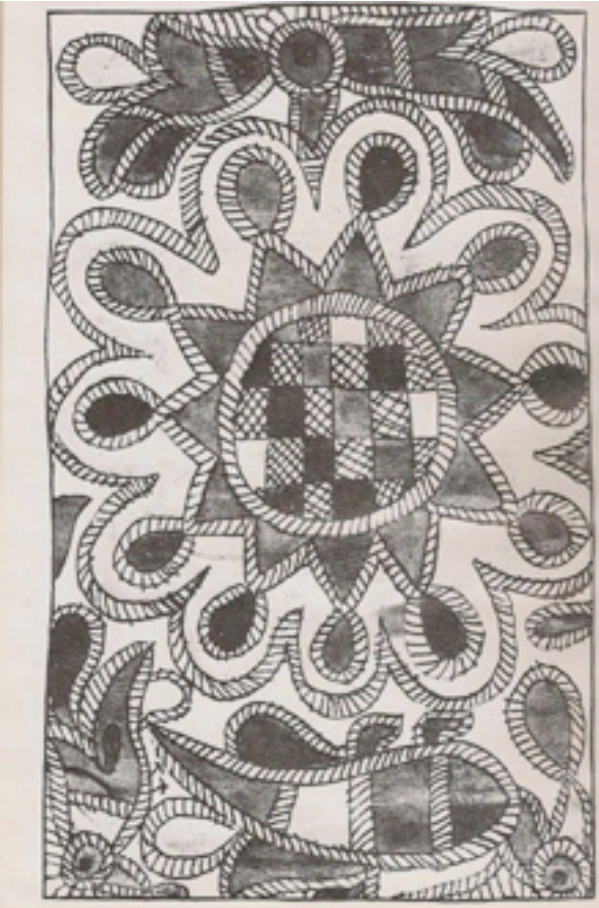


Fig. 10. Madhubani folk art of present day Mithila, Bihar.



Fig. 11. Artistic composition by Krishna Hebbar

Conclusion

While working on the EIP Project we have studied the early petroglyphs in central India that go in antiquity even to the Lower Palaeolithic. In this study we observed that the petroglyphs from Chattaneshwar and Raisen represent the beginning of motif development in Indian rock art, and represent the pre-iconic phase in Indian rock art that precedes the earliest iconic form of rock paintings. Thus, on the basis of circumstantial evidence we have put them in the late late-Pleistocene period (Kumar 2000-01). Definitely, this needs to be tested by further scientific research.

When we consider late late-Pleistocene mobiliary art objects along with petroglyphs of the same period (based on circumstantial evidence), it becomes evident that motif development was a pioneering step of hominins, which later opened a new world for the manifestation of human creativity in the form of simple and complex designs, animal and human forms. A picture of the dawn of Indian art starts emerging. The pioneering efforts of motif development from cupules and engraved lines were followed by simple ostrich eggshell designs and an advanced form of rhomboid design on the patinated cortex of a chalcedony nodule. The intricate designs, which are earliest in the stratigraphy of rock art in India, represent a very advanced stage of designing sense and skill of execution. Creating simple animal and human forms was the hallmark of human creativity achieved in the following stage. The dynamic green dancers and bovid hunters in the rock art of central India are the earliest such examples of early human creativity in the late late-Pleistocene period. Once it was achieved, the artists observed no limit for creating a new world of their perception of reality and imagination in a variety of forms, styles and themes in the following Holocene period.

The early rock paintings in the form of intricate designs and compositions of dynamic dancers superimposing them have many elements used by modern artists. What is more significant is that these works appear as spontaneous creations, coming right from the heart without any intellectual burden and impositions.

Besides, late late-Pleistocene hominins also developed an interest in decorating themselves by using ornaments made of beads, and also the skill and efficiency to produce small and smooth beads on ostrich eggshells.

The evidence of late late-Pleistocene art discussed here is associated with Upper Palaeolithic industries which range tentatively from 40,000 to 10,000 yrs BP.

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