

Rock Art Of Lahaul-Spiti: Symbolism Of Rock Art Representation

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Abstract

Rock art painting is beautiful creation done by Prehistoric settlers. They represented the aesthetic realm of their knowledge about their surrounding through lines, drawings, geometric patterns, hand prints, stencils and symbols. Art for them was a method to communicate their socioculture concepts, rituals and beliefs. The modern theorist had understood the relationship between art and psychology in traditional and realistic aspects. This paper explores the Rock art of Lahaul – Spiti valley in Himachal Pradesh. In this paper, I have analyzed the symbolic, figurative, abstract representations rendered on rock and have traced the meaning of rock art symbolism.

The method employed for image making in Lahul – Spiti rock art is engraving done with hard stone. The rock art of Lahaul- Spiti in the form of a petroglyph. The unique feature of Lahaul – Spiti rock art is that one finds the symbol of Hindu and Buddhist art both. Petroglyphs remained in the Himalayan region of Himachal as a proto-writing communication. Rock art thus in a way is a structural development and communication with form and symbols.

Keywords

Rock Art, Lahaul- Spiti, Symbolism.

Introduction

Rocks as a beautiful canvas for engraving and painting were used by pre-historic human communities to convey religious, natural and cultural heritage. Rock art in archeology is refer to any symbol, image and sign marked on natural living rock by human beings. Through art, he represented the surrounding reality and their cultural environments, stories, technique of art and aesthetic creation. Rock art is the most earliest art of human mind expression forms began with painting and rock engravings. Rock art has been discovered from all over the world depicting the complex thoughts, rituals, beliefs and cults of various Civilizations. Europe Altimira, Lascaux cave in France, Bhimlat in Rajasthan, Kilvalavi, Mavadaippuin Tamil Naidu, and Bhimbhedtka rock shelters are important Indian sites known for rock art inscriptions, petroglyphs and pictographs. In the Himalayan region petroglyphs have been found in Spiti, Ladakh and Tibet. However, the Spiti rock is older than Tibet and Ladakh. The discovery of the inscription found at Tabo provides new information for the the introduction of Tibetan language in Spiti Valley (Thakur, 1998).

The surviving rock art has been found in caves or partially enclosed shelters. The rock art of Lahaul- Spiti however is found engraved on large boulders found beside the river. Rock art in terms of technique can be divided into four kinds – petroglyphs, cave painting, rock relief and geoglyphs. Petroglyph word comes from the Greek prefix petro or petra which means stone and glypho meaning “carve”. The carving is generally done on a living rock. Petroglyphs is a process where the image is created by removing a part of the top layer and creating grooves using a sharp pointed tool. It is also called carving or engraving in art historical terms. When the writing system developed and pictographs were created; petroglyphs began to decline. Rock art is generally larger in size and the figures delineated are larger than the human size.

One of the earliest known references to Spiti in Tibetan literature appears in a 13th-century CE historical text, *lDe’uchos’ Byung*, where it is listed as part of Zhang Zhung, a sovereign kingdom until the mid-7th century CE (Bellezza, 2017). Cave painting refers to an artwork generally done inside the ceilings of caves with the use of natural pigments using brush and charcoal. Rock relief refers to a carved living rock to create a two-dimensional effect or into a free-standing sculpture. Rock relief varies in size it can be as small as it can be held in the palm of a hand or life-sized according to the functionality. Spiti valley also provides some hunting tools like backed blades-flakes, blade-flakes, scrapers, utilized flakes and a large number of debitage (Hari et al., 2017). The method used in rock was almost the same in the Himalayan region with different time periods.

Aim of Study

To study the symbolism and meaning of rock Art in Lahaul –Spiti valley.

Research Methodology

The data was collected from primary and secondary sources. The pictures were taken on the petroglyphs and pictograph sites. Discussion with Local scholars and art historians on the myths and legends associated with the rock art of Lahaul & Spiti valley

Rock art of Lahaul – Spiti

Over the last several years over 1900 boulders or rock outcrops with petroglyphs and eight rock shelters with pictographs have been identified in Spiti (Dowad and Norbu, 2017). Himachal Pradesh that has been the center of various foreign tribes and Janapada is richly marked for its beautiful rock art tradition. Lahaul - Spiti in Himachal Pradesh is one of the regions that is popular for Buddhist and Hindu culture. The rock site at Tak-Tse, Dhungma- Dhansi, Tabo, Nimal, Sumdo, and Drag- Phuk are major sites of rock art. The engraving was not done inside caves but on the big boulders that lay near the river under the open sky. Each boulder found with engraving is different in size some are uneven flat, coarse exposed surfaces. O.C Handa in his Cultic significance of Trans – Himalayan Petroglyphs with Special Reference to Spiti Valley writes “ These rocks are littered haphazardly among many plain rocks having much larger and better surfaces for engraving, but only a few selected rocks are engraved. That may suggest the totemic and cultic significance of these engravings”. According to O.C. Handa the reason for selecting few rocks suggest “Possibly, only such rocks were chosen for engraving which was ritually consecrated for the purpose beforehand. Various art subject that has been depicted on big boulders of Lahaul and Spiti includes images of animals such as ibex, wild Caprid, Sheep, Wild Yak, snow leopards, Swastik, Stupas and images and symbols of Lord Buddha. These symbols were an integral part of the bona belief system (Handa, 2005)

The Prehistoric art form that is preserved in Lahaul - Spiti is in form of Petroglyph and pictographs. A petroglyph is an image created by the removal of a rock surface by incising, carving or removing part of the rock to create a relief like a form. Pictograph painting is done on rock using natural pigments applied with a brush. In the Himalayan region on a closer study of rock engraving, it has been noted that the style and method of executing images on the rock remained uniform in style and character. Most of the engraving on closer study seems to have been done by sharp pointed hard stone – flint or Quartz. Incising done using the sharp tool method had not been employed to engrave an image on rock, as each drawing outline is not very deep. The tonal effect of each drawing also lacks a detailed scratching. The stone boulders with art that are found in Lahaul - Spiti are granite and Schist. The use of red ochre was most predominant feature of Lahaul - Spiti rock art. Most of the rocks crust has also been seen turned to red metallic color, an effect due to climatic exposure serving a naturally painted surface to the artist. As far as the dating of these engravings and rock paintings is concerned, it is too premature to state

anything conclusively without comparative studies with the neighboring regions, particularly Ladakh, Tibet, and Zaskar (Singh, Bodh and Kalani, 2017).

The rock art delineated by artists in Lahaul - Spiti is in symbolic and figurative language. The depiction of Ibex and blue sheep are identified with shorter horns facing in opposite directions. The head of ibex is generally drawn above the body arch of the ibex. They worshipped ibex for fertility and figures of it were often carved on rocks. (Charak, 1979) Animal figures in each composition are placed at distance the middle frame of the rock generally has a large-sized animal drawing with smaller-sized animal drawings surrounding it.

The hunting Animals are shown attacked with bows and arrows. Among the surviving anthropomorphic composition, the images of the human form are reduced to symbolic and basic line-drawing characteristics. The bodies are shown with uplifted or outstretched arms as if engaged in some activity, giving them a rhythm of movement and activity. Lines and geometric patterns are often repeated in rock art to depict complex scenes, activities and moments. Carving of human figures, weapons, bows and arrows is also seen on many rocks. An interesting aspect of these primitive engraving is that the human figures accompanying the ibexes are the Ibex are treated in a very curious manner. (Handa, 2012).

The petroglyphs at Tabo have already become the victims of human apathy under the euphoria of developmental activities and the fate of these ancient relics of human enterprise in the valley is uncertain (Handa, 2017). Symbolic representations of signs such as the swastika, sun, half moon, tree and circles were also discovered in rock engraving.

Symbolism and Meaning of rock art

The symbolic behavior of pre-historic settlers conveyed two pictorial systems linearity and abstraction. The simplest sign such as crosses, circles, and dot are the most difficult to understand as they are used in a different contexts. The Circle along with the animal figure can mean a trap. Animal hunting scene compositions along with human figures had been created by pre-historic people as it is closely associated with totemic and magic cults. Circles in rock art also can mean the representation of season cycles, indicating that they had knowledge of universal climatic changes. The rocks are affirmed that some were abraded in different intervals of time (Hand, 2012).

Ibex is depicted as a totemic cult animal as it is abundantly found in the Himalayan belts of Himachal, Tibet and Ladakh. The animal is drawn singly or in herds. In terms of style, the figure is portrayed with long arched horns, and an elongated body. Ibex in Dardic cult system must have been very important as still present in many parts of the Himalayan region with Dardic group displaying the antlers of Ibex. Dardic people were as known

were followers of mixed religions Hinduism and Buddhism. The widespread of these rock arts in the Himalayan region is evidence of Daro's sociocultural influence (Handa, 2017).

Their art was rich in style as they were exposed to various cross-cultural influences. There is a possible reason to assume that the rock carving was done in Lahaul –Spiti is by their very early ancestors. The early art form of their known is to present simple lines, lozenges pattern, and chip carving without the use of a chisel.

The aesthetic and religious compulsion in pre-historic art is language conveyed through religious symbols. Stupa as a religious symbol and engravings of Buddha ascertain the influence of philosophical morality of early settlers. From religious carving, it is apparent that the area has blossomed under the religious missionary. The art of building huge architecture was not in fashion so conventional symbol was the part of creation.

Some Art historians believe that some anthropomorphs in associated with some animals having stick-like bodies, accentuated phalli and putting a high peaked headdress each. These figures seem to be holding a device like *pasa*, which has iconographic attributes in historical times of a Hindu god (Nauriyal, 2017).

Conclusion

Symbols in the art are the widely used pictorial language to translate human thoughts into a visual narrative. Artist throughout the age has used a recognizable character, lines, and drawings that stand for themselves. Symbols in the art are used by artists to depict the meaning of far reality that is transcendental. Rock art engravings are a means to understand the creativity and psychology of the human race. Psychology is the understanding of objective behavior in relation to emotions and art is the projection of human understanding and production. Rock art thus in a way is a structural development and communication with form and symbols. Art creation becomes an important tool of communication as it is valued for its conceptual framework and at the same time it is a mechanism to induce value in society. The purpose is also to build a relationship between art and artist with community and culture; the influence of community on cultural belief and art.

Art, society and Psychology aim to analyze perception, phenomena and the close relationship between human creativity. Pre-historic art be it animistic deliberations or religious symbols is created to create social values and norms. For example, the engraving of the Stupa holds a rich tradition of the Buddhist religion and when such objects are identified for studies it creates a tradition to learn the Buddhist culture. The significance of the symbol is the introspection of tradition. Rock art engraving has a very close relationship with the spiritual principles of divine belief. Shaman dances as auditory perception and images as perceptual visuals are combined for verbal expression to the soul of art.

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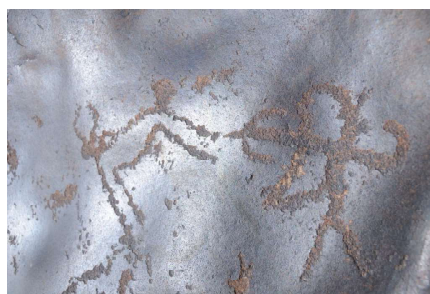
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Figure. 1 Fig showing Ibex



Source: Authors Own

Figure. 2 Hunting scene in petroglyph



Source: Authors Own

Figure. 3Hand carving on stone



Source: Authors Own

Figure. 4Symbols painted on the walls of cave



Source: Authors Own

Figure. 5 Swastik symbol painted in white ochre



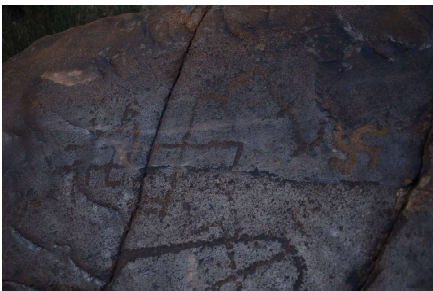
Source: Authors Own

Figure. 6Horse Rider



Source: Authors Own

Figure. 7 Swastik symbols engraved on stone



Source: Authors Own

Figure. 8A Bird with Horns



Source: Authors Own