SUPERSTITIOUS BELIEFS AND SPUPERNATURAL POWERS – AN ETHNO-ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY OF INDIAN ROCK PAINTINGS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an ethno-archaeological study of superstitious beliefs and supernatural powers as depicted in Indian rock paintings. By analyzing motifs, symbols, and recurring themes across various prehistoric and historic rock art sites, the study aims to decode the spiritual and cosmological worldview of the communities that created them. The research draws parallels between the iconography of the rock paintings and the superstitious beliefs and rituals practiced by modern-day tribal and indigenous communities . This comparative approach provides valuable insights into the continuity of cultural traditions and the enduring role of supernatural powers in shaping human behavior and social structure. The findings suggest that these rock paintings are not merely artistic expressions but serve as a visual lexicon of ancient beliefs, offering a unique window into the spiritual life and cultural heritage of India's past.

KEYWORDS: Ethno archaeology, rock paintings , symbols, prehistory

Across India's vast mountain ranges, including the Vindhyas, Satpuras, Aravallis, and the Eastern and Western Ghats, you'll find a remarkable collection of rock art sites. These aren't just random drawings; they are the stories of prehistoric people, etched into the walls of rock shelters where they lived.One of the most incredible of these sites is Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh. It's a massive collection, with nearly 740 rock shelters containing paintings that span an astonishing 20,000 years of history. The art acts as a time capsule, showing us everything from the simple, day-to-day moments of their lives—like childbirth and communal dances—to their more profound rituals, like burials. They even painted the world around them, giving us a glimpse into the animals and environment they knew so well[1]. To understand these ancient rock paintings, we'll use an ethno-archaeological approach. This means we'll look for clues in the art itself and then connect them to the traditions and beliefs of modern-day tribal and indigenous communities in India. By seeing how these cultural practices have continued over time, we can get a much clearer picture of what the paintings meant to the people who created them[2].

The rock paintings, mostly created with red and white ochre (and sometimes green and yellow), offer a vibrant look into the lives of ancient people. They painted what they knew: hunting scenes, people dancing and making music, riders on horses and elephants, and even rituals like honey collection and body decoration.Animals are a major focus, with creatures like lions, tigers, bison, and crocodiles appearing frequently. Some caves even contain symbols that suggest religious or ritual beliefs. Interestingly, some early researchers believed they found a painting at the Monteroja rock shelter in Pachmarhi, Madhya Pradesh, that resembled the story of the Sumerian king Gilgamesh. The painting shows a human figure with raised hands standing between a lion and a bull. While a direct connection to Sumerian culture hasn't been systematically proven, the image is still powerful. It likely symbolizes the supremacy of man over nature, with the lion representing the wild and the bull representing domesticated animals and agriculture. The figure beautifully captures the transition of Neolithic man from a hunter-gatherer to a settled farmer[3].

Another painting from the same shelter depicts two big cats, probably lions, standing back to back with a human figure in the centre . This again is reminiscent of the painting of lions which accompanies Aker, who was an ancient earth-god of Egypt. He was believed to guard the gates of the dawn from which the sun rose each morning. He was portrayed as a double-headed lion, or as two lions sitting back-to-back. In between them is shown the sun with the sky overhead. In this way, they form the akhet symbol, which was a symbol of the horizon. Occasionally they were portrayed bearing the akhet on their backs. The two lions were called Sef and Duau, which means "yesterday" and "today" respectively [4] .

Pandey identified the Pachmarhi painting as a deity, but it's possible the artist simply wanted to show a god's incredible power—stronger than any animal, able to control two lions at once. This idea of a central, powerful figure flanked by animals isn't unique to the prehistoric era. For example, a similar motif can be seen on the capital of a temple at Sanchi from the Gupta period (fourth century CE). In that carving, lions stand on either side of a talipot palm, where the tree likely symbolizes the Buddha. This echoes the indigenous thought from the ancient cave painting and shows how these powerful, symbolic ideas have continued to be important in Indian culture for thousands of years[5].

Human figures with animal heads are also frequent in rock art.The human figures with beaked heads are identified as bird heads.There are several other animals like the horse, antelope, bison and other unidentified heads worn by humans, which are seen in the rock paintings.

Many scholars have identified these as masks worn by humans during hunting and other ceremonial activities. A rock painting from La MolaRemigia (c. 7000-4000 BCE) in eastern Spain depicts a group of hunters rushing to their hunt (Fig. 4). In this painting, the hunting group is shown with different attributes. Alan Houghton Brodrick says, "All the men wear some kind of headdress, while the chief (of the tribe or hunting group) are so stylized that they look like caricatures of masks, but the leader's grim, determined profile is almost, if not quite, human. In this, scene, infact, we have one of the very rare prehistoric paintings of a human face[6].

According to Bharatha Iyer, early humans found composite figures—part human, part animal—entirely believable. They would even dress up like these creatures, convinced that such forms would give them a magical advantage in the hunt. A famous example is a prehistoric cave painting in France, which shows a

fantastic figure with a bearded human face, the round eyes of an owl, the ears of a wolf, the antlers of a stag, the claws of a lion, and the tail of a wolf or horse. This bizarre look was probably meant to confuse and unnerve the animals being hunted. For ancient people, a creature made up of so many different parts must have seemed incredibly powerful, as if it had absorbed the unique qualities and magical virtues of each animal[7].

You'll find paintings of human figures with horns and masks in many rock art sites across India, dating back to the Upper Paleolithic age. While these figures aren't always clearly identifiable, they appear in places like Bhimbetka, Sagar, and Pachmarhi, to name just a few. Researchers interpret them in different ways, seeing them as shamans, demons, heroes, or deities, depending on the context of the paintings they're found in Tamil Nadu, located in the Eastern and Western Ghats, more than 30 rock art sites have been discovered. The paintings there are found on rock shelters, isolated boulders, and even on the inside of megalithic tombs. Animals are the most common subject, followed by human figures and various symbols. The most frequently depicted animals include bison, buffaloes, deer, elephants, and horses[8].

In Tamil Nadu, rock art sites like Kilvalai, Alambadi, and Settavarai feature fascinating human figures with horns, beaked heads, and masks. For example, a painting at Kilvalai shows four men with bird-like beaks standing in a row on a boat. Another one from the same site depicts men with horned headgear and beaked faces, which strikingly resemble some ancient Egyptian paintings.These images of masked figures might point to ritualistic beliefs, a tradition that continues to be a vibrant part of rural and tribal culture in India today. At Kidaraipatti in Madurai district, a similar figure with a bird's head is drawn with an X-shaped body, holding a weapon. He looks like a warrior, showing that these masked and composite figures represented a range of ideas, from spiritual beings to powerful protectors. These paintings are a beautiful testament to the enduring traditions that have been passed down for thousands of years[9].

At Sirumalai in Dindigul district, there's a fascinating painting of a human figure standing between two large cats, holding a weapon. The animals face the person, a composition that reminds us of the Gilgamesh-like painting found at Pachmarhi. While the exact meaning of this image is a mystery, it's another great example of the powerful human-versus-nature theme that runs through ancient Indian rock art. In the Nilgiri district, Velleri Kombai is considered one of Tamil Nadu's oldest rock art sites. It was first discovered by Professor Allen Zackerel in 1984 and later studied by local archaeologists. The site features only pictographs—paintings on rock surfaces—and no petroglyphs, which are carvings or engravings. This distinction highlights the different techniques ancient artists used to tell their stories in stone[10].In the Nilgiri region, local tribes believe that the Velleri Kombai rock paintings were created by their ancestors, most likely the Kurumba tribe of hunter-gatherers and medicine men. This belief is supported by archaeologists and ethno-archaeologists, who confirm the paintings are prehistoric, dating specifically to the Neolithic period—around 3,000 years ago[11].Archaeologist M.K. Dhavalikar notes that tribal populations are often viewed as the living descendants of earlier primitive social groups. This perspective adds depth to the study of these rock paintings, suggesting a direct link between the ancient artists and the modern tribes who still live in the area today[12].

Archaeologists have tried to understand the meanings behind these rock paintings. R. Poongundran, a former registering officer for the State Archaeology Department, believed the images were created by Neolithic cattle keepers. He thought these ancient herders migrated from nearby Karnataka into the Western Ghats region of Tamil Nadu[13].M. Basavalingam, a retired English professor from Ooty, had a different take: he believed the paintings depicted extraterrestrial beings with magical and religious powers. In his article, he even compared these figures to similar rock art found in Australia, suggesting a possible link between ancient cultures and their belief in beings from other worlds[14]. In his article, he made a compelling attempt to compare the so-called extraterrestrial figures with similar rock art depictions found in Australia[15]. The unusual, non-realistic figures in these paintings likely had a magico-religious purpose. The local Kurumba tribe still regards them as sacred messages from their ancestors, calling the site "Eluthuparai," or "pictograph-rock." They even replicate the designs on the bodies of the sick and on their huts during festivals, showing a direct link between the ancient art and their modern traditions.

The paintings, made with red ochre, feature human-like figures with rectangular bodies and detailed, masked heads adorned with bison horns, leaves, and bird feathers. These masks reveal a desire for superhuman powers, with early humans seeking to embody the strength and abilities of animals for hunting and defense.This practice of attributing animal and weapon characteristics to powerful beings continued as religious beliefs evolved. The transfer of tribal weapons and animal traits to deities—like the chakra becoming Vishnu's weapon—demonstrates how ancient superstitions and beliefs were incorporated into later religious traditions[16]. According to Pandey, the earliest incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu—such as the fish, tortoise, boar, and Narasimha (half-man, half-lion)—show how animals became central to Hindu mythology and worship.

This reverence for animals and birds is also reflected in Indian art, where creatures like fish, elephants, and lions are used as decorative motifs. Even ancient Indus Valley seals depict various animals and birds, making it clear that the spiritual importance of these species has been recognized in India since very early times.[17]

Based on the evidence from the rock paintings, we can conclude that prehistoric people believed in superhuman concepts and sought to incorporate the power of nature and animals into their religious beliefs. The anthropomorphic figures, animal-headed humans, and masked figures are all likely a result of these convictions. This interest in acquiring animal powers and belief in a higher being led them to create these mythical figures. Since these ancient rock paintings align so closely with contemporary tribal traditions, an ethno-archaeological study of them can provide valuable insights into the social and religious lives of primitive people.

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