
Content and Style in North Vindhyan Rock Paintings, Mirzapur and Sonbhadra Districts, Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract: Skills deal with the ability to do things and techniques with ways of doing them. In this paper discussing Eastern Vindhyan rock art, documented from 2009 to 2023, we identify the chief skills and narrative techniques used in a sample of thirty shelters, in seven distinct groups. It is argued distinctiveness is obtained by the chaine operatoire followed by artists in making rock art. The use of shapes, colours, themes, surfaces, and the contact material are discussed. Mesolithic to Neolithic paintings are often superimposed or juxtaposed by iron-age ones. Early historic, medieval, and colonial rock art is also found in the same caves. Learning of skills is evident from drawings made by children, youth, and young adults. While there is significant variability between sites, from one cluster to the next, this group of rock paintings have a distinct Eastern Vindhyan style.

Keywords: Vindhyan Rock Art, Prehistoric Painters, Painting Techniques, Cultural Narratives, Superimposition, Agro-pastoral Scenes, Regional Variations

Introduction

Vindhyan rock art, in the districts of Mirzapur and Sonbhadra (Figures 1a, b and c), has been noted and studied steadily from the mid-19th century (Allchin, 1958, Bednarik, 2009, Brandt et al., 1983, Carlyle, 1883, Cockburn, 1879, 1883a and b, 1884, 1888, 1889, 1894, Ghosh, 1932, Kumar, 2006, Kumar et al. 2006a, Kumar et al. 2010, Mandal, 2001, Pratap and Kumar 2009, Pratap, 2011a and b, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2018a b, c and d, 2019, 2020, Sieveking, 1960, Tewari 1988, 1990, Varma, 2012). Speaking of the paintings and the material found in rock shelters near the river Sone, Cockburn (1889, 93) suggests: “Many of them are in exceedingly dangerous positions, necessitating crawling down the face of a precipice on the hands and knees; but most of these in nearly inaccessible caves, if there is any earth on the floor, form veritable museums of prehistoric antiquities in the way of flint knives, cores, arrow-heads, celts, fragments of fossil and charred bone, pottery, etc. Following upon previous essays introducing this material (Pratap and Kumar 2009, Pratap 2016), this one focuses upon skills and techniques in rock paintings of our study area.

The Vindhyas in Mirzapur and Sonbhadra enjoy a unique role of being hinterland to the middle part of the Ganges Valley, the terminal part of the Sone Valley, and the

origin for several rivers like Belan, Karamnasha, the Adwa, the Khajuri and the Garai; most of them with evidence of prehistoric human settlement and material culture. The area being hydrologically so rich, has attracted human settlement from prehistory to history and traditional subsistence practices like agro-pastoralism continue there from early history, the medieval period, to the day.

The present study was conducted at such geomorphically distinct localities with rock art as Wyndham Falls, Likhaniya Dari, Chuna Dari, Morhana Pahar, Lekhahia Pahar, Mukkha Dari, Panchmukhi and Kanda Kot, all on the East-West trending ridges of the Kaimur and the Vindhya just north of the Sone Valley. While most upland sites are located next to water-sources, those next to upland rivers may have been only temporary or seasonal camps like at Panchmukhi, Likhaniya and Chuna Dari, Mukkha Dari and Wyndham Falls, with microlithic scatters and larger flake tools, used by hunter-foragers and pastoralists, while other scarp sites like Lekhahia and Morhana Pahar which were possibly longer-term encampments, complete with superimpositions, multiple colour use, evidence of community life like multiple hand-imprints, dancing scenes and ring-stone burials. The former category of rocky gorge sites were probably extractive (hunting-fishing, trapping, or pastoral cattle-camps) active only part of the year and the latter were year-round home (residential) bases.

The Background

At a rough estimate and in the context of excavations at such shelters (Brandt et al. 1983, Jayaswal 1983, Mishra and Pal, 2002, Sharma, 1967, Varma, 1967) rock paintings in the Vindhyas date at the earliest from the Epi-Palaeolithic, but both residential and painting activity continue through to the Iron Age and the late historical period with a few examples of medieval and modern rock art suggesting rock shelter use until the late 19th century. As Paddayya (2015, 98) rightly suggests in his review of the transition from hunting-foraging to farming in India “Still the issue is fluid and no capping words have been pronounced.” Since rock art very obviously played a role in such a transition, in the Vindhyas, it is hoped this review will take us towards an understanding of the cognitive, social, economic, spatial, and geographical/territorial strategies and spin-offs of the socio-cultural and indeed historical transformation of rock painting communities through time.

In a five-page countrywide review of rock art, given in Ghosh's Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology (Ghosh 1989, 279-284), Mirzapur and its rock art find noticeable mention. This is largely due to its discovery as early as 1883 by Carlyle (1883a) and subsequent writing on the subject by Cockburn. Although traditionally Archibald Carlyle has been given all the credit, it is actually his contemporary Cockburn who not only published much more but also surveyed rock art sites more extensively. A consummate prehistorian although professionally an opium officer of the colonial period stationed at Varanasi Cockburn's writings make for a treasure-house of information about many more locations of rock art than Carlyle discusses, as well as descriptions of their primary contexts far in excess of what Carlyle provides (Cockburn

1883 a and b, 1884, 1888, 1889, Pratap 2016). The colonial period writing makes for very interesting reading, not only because it was Carlyle's sharing his notes with the American archaeologist J.A. Brown (see Brown 1888, 1892) that brought about the idea of a new age called the "Mezolithic" as expounded by Carlyle but the "Mesolithic" by Brown (1888, 1892). The very first unambiguous examples of Mesolithic tools came from such shelters as Morhana Pahar in Mirzapur. Subsequently, Binford (1968), citing both Carlyle and Brown, regards the Mesolithic assemblages from Mirzapur as a technology adapted to Post-Pleistocene climatic changes. Rock art of central India, from Bhimbetka to Sone and the Belan, and possibly even up to Jharkhand and Chattisgarh to Allahabad, is often regarded as one tradition. The term style is however used in archaeological contexts to denote particular ways of doing things materially, that while characterizing particular individuals or groups, is also an evident chronological marker. Style also encompasses the broad representational 'rules' followed by painting communities to give their expression its distinctive look and information content. Hence for our purposes, style pertains to ways of making paintings, surfaces and colours chosen, subjects selected, techniques used, and similarities across a region of key attributes leading to its 'typical' iconic and visual appearance setting it apart from other traditions.

Hence, together with the 'type' or types of images executed in a particular tradition of rock paintings, we must also consider elements such as location in geographical space and place. Vindhyan rock art is usually located near water-bodies like riversides or waterfalls, or isolated hillocks or scarpland. Painted on vertical walls and ceilings of caves, ledges, and cliffs, are all connected with prehistoric subsistence, settlement, and conceptual/social behaviour enacted to changing historical circumstances in the Northern Vindhyas.

In the Vindhyas paintings occur from the Upper Pleistocene to early and later Holocene whitish to yellowish calcites deposited by the leaching of scarp sandstones, in a widely fluctuating climate from excessively wet to dry regimes, which also deposited considerable laterites, the predominant ferric paints extracted from banded sources in sandstones as well as profuse mudstones occurring in highland rivers and streams. Some surfaces are rough and were possibly made paint-friendly by abrading them and rubbing them down for brushing off organic blackish debris, which is ubiquitous due to rainwater action; choosing 'safe' surfaces on which human and natural damage would be minimal. Thus paintings at open-air sites or of the first category are usually high, but they are also relatively free from monsoon run-off, and direct animal contact.

It is very clear then that prehistoric painters of the Vindhyan range were aware of and controlled for smoothness, texture, and hues of surfaces, nature, and qualities of various paints, the impact of temperature, wind, and water. The location of paintings in shaded, cool, and water-free parts of rock surfaces reflects such choices.. Inside caves and shelters, they are usually clustered around the entrances or near such parts where

daily campfires or hearths would be lit, affording sufficient illumination and longing space. Placing paintings on calcites, at odd heights (Figures 2a, 2b and 4) was probably an experiment due to their submergence under further calcining, leading to favourite compositions being redrawn at safer spots.

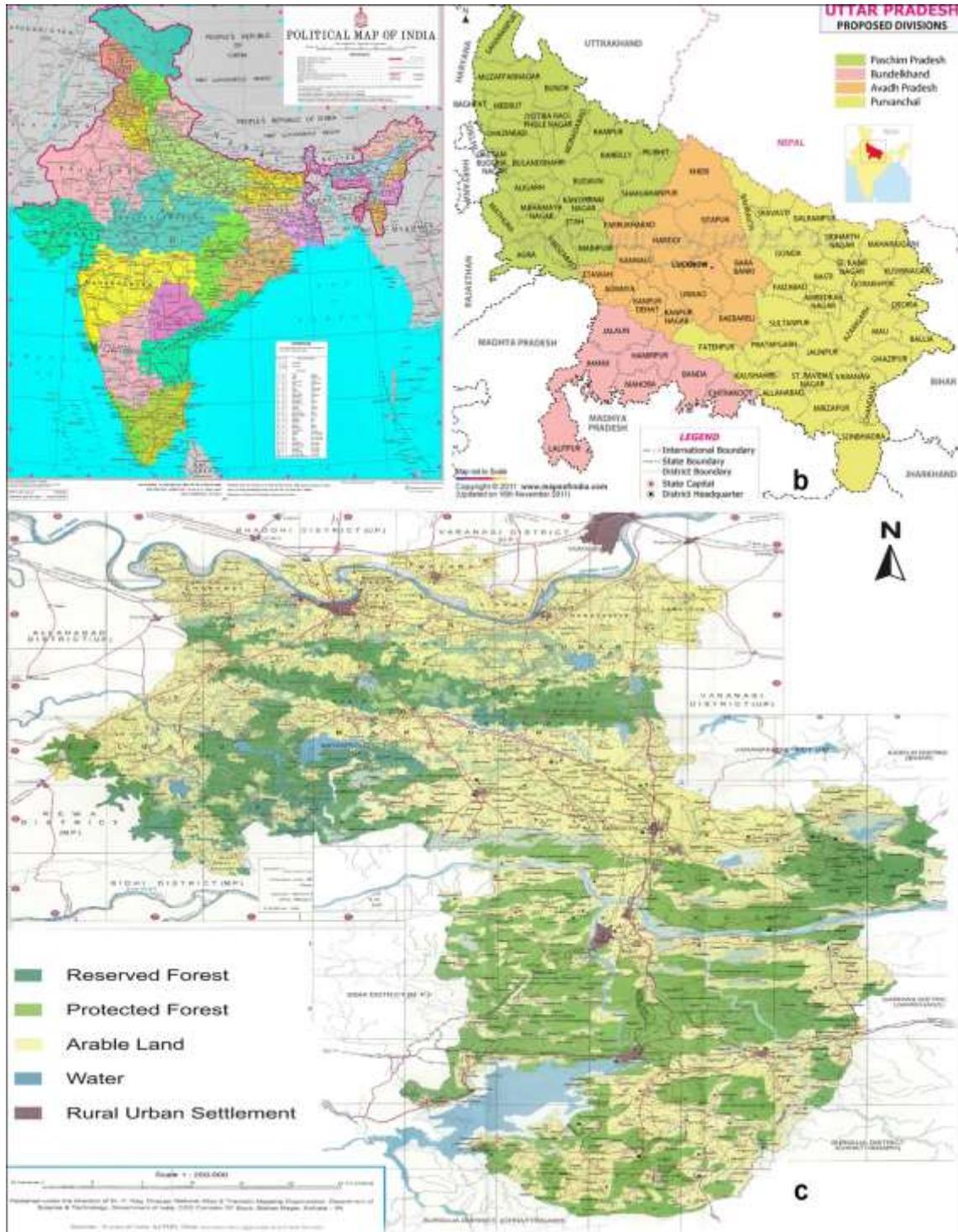


Figure 1a, b and c: Map of India, Uttar Pradesh State, Mirzapur and Sonbhadra Districts, and the Southern Uttar Pradesh region (Source: Wikimedia)

Thus drawings inside residential caves and shelters turn out different from more 'public' representations at open-air locations both in terms of content and conservation. Variations also exist in methods involved in transporting paint to surfaces by hand-dabs and smears used in executing works of art. Large unresolved blotches of paint are sometimes found on large panels suggesting ready and very viscous paint was patted onto them in cakes for use in a painting session. Freehand drawings and paintings using fingers, hand-stencils, imprints, and outlines, brush paintings with thin and thick brushes and the use of pointed styluses are most common.

Techniques

The term technique refers to the way a thing or task is done and how well it might. Our choice of paintings discussed here, out of several thousand individual images and thematic panels intend to provide a broad sample of all the technical attributes deemed to exist in them although these are liable to vary over a combined area of 12,000 sq km of the two districts. Variations also exist in methods involved in transporting paint to surfaces by hand-dabs and flattened out with brushes or smearing. Freehand drawings and paintings using fingers, hand-stencils, imprints, and outlines, brush paintings with thin and thick brushes and with the use of styluses are most common. A fundamental characteristic in northern Vindhyan rock art is that surfaces with calcitic flows and deposits from monsoonal run-offs, or in situ leaching, were used very often as painting surfaces, due to the better contrasts they offered for ferric oxide-enriched paints.



a



b

Figures 2a and b: Thematic and random paintings from Mukkha Dari (MKD 1) showing large river fish from Belan River and economically important predominant faunal species from its rocky upriver reaches situated in a fault. All paintings are executed on top of calcite deposits leached and deposited on Dhadhraul sandstone rock surfaces (whitish due to quartz and calcium) and pinkish 'Rewa' scarp sandstones (due to the presence of iron).

Examples include Mukkha Dari, Panchmukhi, Likhaniya Dari, Chuna Dari, and Morhana Pahar. another notable characteristic is that paintings of the region also have their design lexicon or the building blocks of shapes used most frequently, and their translation into figures. Use of finger marking or flutes, and styluses, and brushes are made evident by the sharpness of the edges of images. Paints and colours used for the

activity include black, ochre (in 5 shades), yellow and white. Black and ochre colours occur under the earliest dated calcitic events at Wyndham Falls (Banerjee and Chakraverty, 2016, Pratap, 2016), with ochres predominating throughout and yellows, blacks, and whites used very infrequently.

Northern Vindhyan rock art has numerous themes and narratives in them (Pratap, 2016, 2018). The simplest, in which individual animals or their hunt is painted valorizes the signified events, such as in the depiction of a school of fish at Mukkha Dari (Figures 1a and 1b). These same panels also have humans hunting tortoises, a 'herd of deer', and humans in association with cattle. There is also a high frequency of paintings with movement such as in dogs chasing after a deer, which makes such paintings more complex than the former. This painting is located at Wyndham Falls (Figure 2b). Belonging probably to the Epi-Palaeolithic and the mesolithic, animal-movement paintings evolve later on to include material culture like flying arrows, spears, summersaulting humans (Figures 9a; 16a and b). A composition with only humans, perhaps of the iron-age, at Wyndham Falls (WYN 4.2) involves two groups of people in conflict, shooting arrows and throwing spears at each other, has the use of animation. This is more complex because such paintings also involve material culture which is either absent or rudimentary in examples from the terminal Pleistocene and the early holocene.



Figure 3a, and b: From Wyndham Falls (WYN 3) showing Pleistocene paintings under calcites dated to 14 Ka BP, line finger marks both below and above, and a dog figure in the pursuit of two deer probably gazelle both above and below Pleistocene to Holocene calcite deposits.

An early, thematic panel at Morhana Pahar (CAR -16) of an elephant surrounded by several humans wielding thrusting spears in the act of spearing it also assumes movement (Figure 6). It is painted in yellow-brown ochre, and is the only such painting among our sites. Indeed the more 'historical' latter-day themes showing soldiers and horsecarts at Lekhahia and Morhana Pahar, but also Kanda Kot, Likhaniya and Chuna Dari, seem to draw upon and take inspiration from the earlier narrative tradition. For example, at Likhaniya Dari, the panel showing royal soldiery capturing a wild elephant (Figure 13a), commented upon by Ghosh (1932) and Varma (2012) is

located just above a scene in which blackbuck deer are entangled in a thorny mass-trap built at the end of a v-shaped valley with one end a cul-de-sac where such hunts did probably take place (Figures 7a and 7b), and which in turn is above a scene with men catching, snaring and killing large birds (Ghosh, 1932).

Many examples of basic shapes like points, lines, triangles, squares, rectangles, circles, crosses, zigzag and crosshatched patterns, have been used to improvise human, animal, artefact and patterned shapes in various permutations and combinations. The use of such building blocks is a phenomenon across sites and provides a definitive stylistic baseline. This technique for conjuring humans (through triangles), and animal shapes (through squares and rectangles) suggests itself as a means of teaching young apprentices. Loin-cloths and horizontal T-shaped hairstyles are found used at Wyndham, Chuna Dari, and Morhana Pahar to distinguish indigenes from outsiders, but this ethnic specificity is also embellished by giving them varying material culture as iconic imperatives. Metal weapons and implements are Iron age possibly even late historic and made with a recognition of the earlier simpler material culture of which examples abound. In the case of women, ear-rings, clothing, and body shapes play a critical role, with the hair in a bun. Children too are occasionally depicted. The adult male is usually unmistakable.



Figure 4: Painting of a large or small lizard widely found in the area, on a ceiling hidden from direct lateral view (WYN 3)

Rock art sites along salient drainage lines and waterfalls, like the Mukkha Dari, have similarities in style with sites of the same region like Kanda Kot, Pnachmukhi, Kauva Khoh and Ghormangar which are closer to the Sone valley. The style of casting human and animal figures at these sites is at variance at scarpland sites like Morhana and Lekhahia Pahar, Wyndham Falls, and Likhaniya and Chuna Dari which are at a greater elevation and distance from the reiver Sone and hence probably also represent different communities of painters. This stylistic difference, it may be argued, is on account of different ecological advantages and economic adaptations, as perhaps kin and group differences, present in the two geomorphologically varied locales offering

variable resources. In the former, aquatic scenes, fish and some fauna like rhinos are unique, whereas the latter is predominant in cattle, buffalo, sheep and goat, and other smaller land, canine, simian and avian fauna.



Figure 5: Finger-fluted schematic human figures, inverted triangles, and other indistinct shapes on calcite deposits on the lower part of the WYN 3 Shelter, at Wyndham Falls, probably represent children's attempts to paint and draw.



a



b



c

Figure 6a, b, and c: are three examples of finger-fluted human forms. Figure b possibly represents over twenty dancing human figures, superimposed by a later Capra drawing.

Five types of ochres have been used, together with white, yellow, and black paint. From the earliest to the last, an overall preference for ochres is evident, given the lateritic soil cover, but the few yellow, black, and white paintings indicate melted fat, campfire soot, and crushed quartz as being used together with colluvial calcretes, but far less than ochres. Most paintings inside dwellings on the scarps could and did paint with varying levels of interest and skill. Variation in the levels of adeptness in the execution of images appears intentional between specialist paintings, mundane, practice and children's drawings. This implies people of different age sets, gender, and skills inhabiting these locations over a considerable period of time.

Paintings were planned, designed, and executed taking into account the microtopography of the rock surfaces. The finest mural panels such as at Likhaniya Dari and Morhana Pahar are executed on the smoothest of surfaces in which elaborately executed human, animal, and design forms occur. However, as an aggregate, all types of surfaces even ones deep inside that would scarcely reflect light have paintings on them. Many drawings, however, are made with a notable casualness suggesting the mundaneness of painting but the occasional highly skilled panel suggests painting activity to have been of high value. Many smudges of earlier paintings, painting-overs, and erasures of paintings, and superimpositions on them by dwellers of the shelters, suggest the painted surfaces to have served as community canvases. Occasionally, dwellers of a rock shelter or a group of shelters may have visited each other, and executed paintings as part of social visits, in their individual styles. Paintings seem to be for expression and experimentation recording things familiar and observed.



Figure 7: Yellow paint with animal fat depicting an elephant being hunted by a dozen people at CAR 16, Morhana Pahar

Calcites above and below paintings at Wyndham, Chuna Dari and Mukkha Dari Falls Sites also suggest climatic fluctuations. Cycles of excessive leaching (in wet regimes) and drying of rock surfaces (during very dry oscillations) are detectable through

caliches at these sites which confirms similar geoarchaeological inference through AMS, OSL and IRSL dating of sediments, shell and other correlative caliches (as nodules and kankars) from river terraces and valley alluvial strata (Williamns and Royce 1983, Gibling 2007, Pandey, 2010).

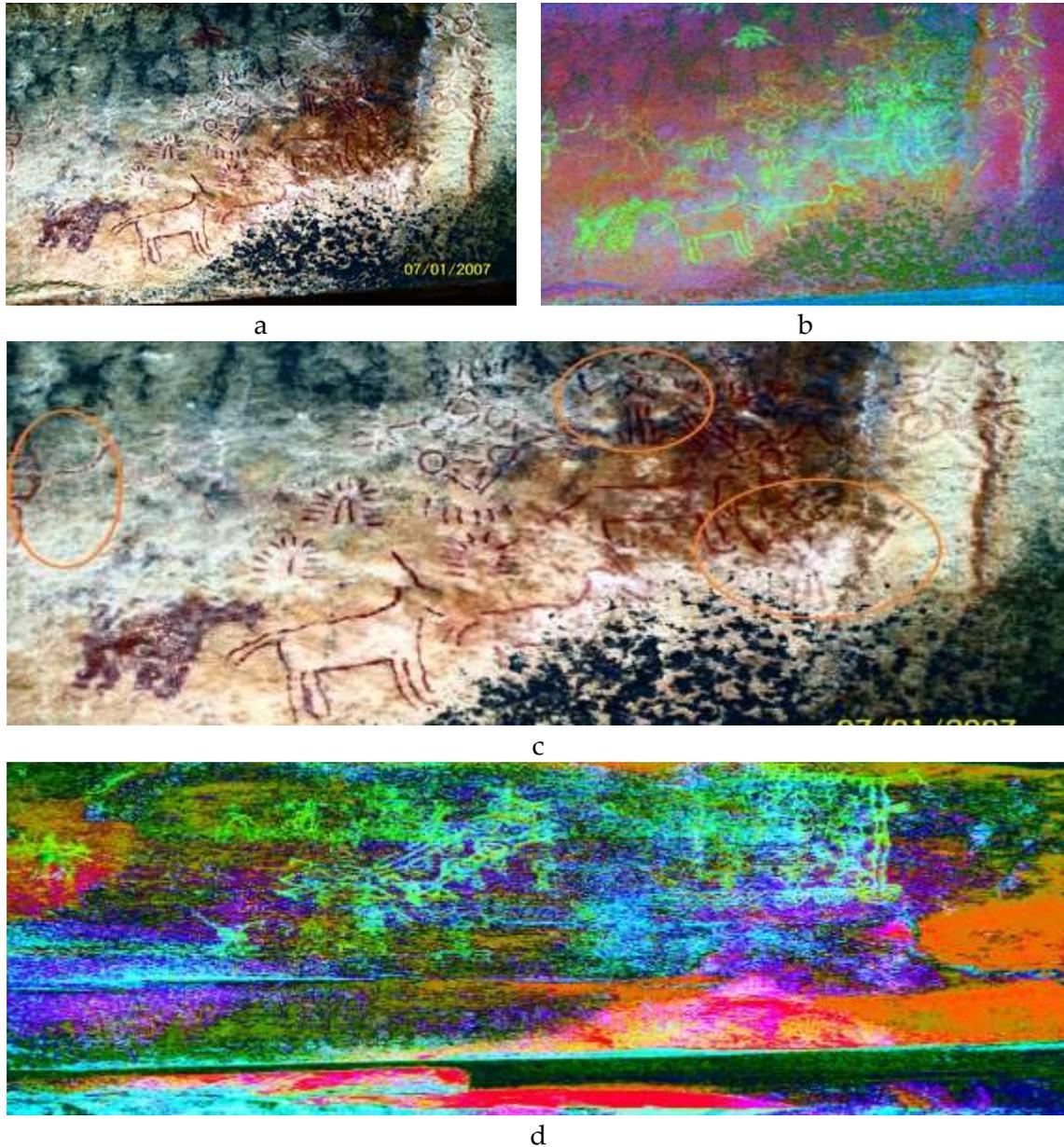


Figure 8a, b, and c. Two thematic trapping scenes at the same shelter at Likhaniya Dari showing a neolithic deer-trapping scene with the use of spikey kites constructed at the exit point of river Garai in Sukrit valley. Use of stylus in drawing thin lines is evident. 8d is also noted by Ghosh (1932, 16), and occurs just below the Elephant capture scene and shows three human figures, probably women, stampeding three deer into the trap. Decorative images on the right-hand margin probably represent thorny barricades totally sealing deer from exiting the valley. Fig. d is also noted by Ghosh (1932, 16) as depicted a number of men capturing large birds with nets. All figures DStretched.

However, it would be true to say that for better contrast and viewing, calcified surfaces are preferred for painting. Firm lines have been used for human and animal figures, revealing firm and adultlike execution, mostly in orange, red, and purple ochres, with only the earliest figure of a deer is done exceptionally in black. The preponderance of thicker over thinner lines used for drawings suggests itself as an evolving preference. Hunting scenes involving elephants, wild boar, deer, crocodiles, rhinoceros, nilgai, chital, and sambar, suggest such wild fauna were local to the area.

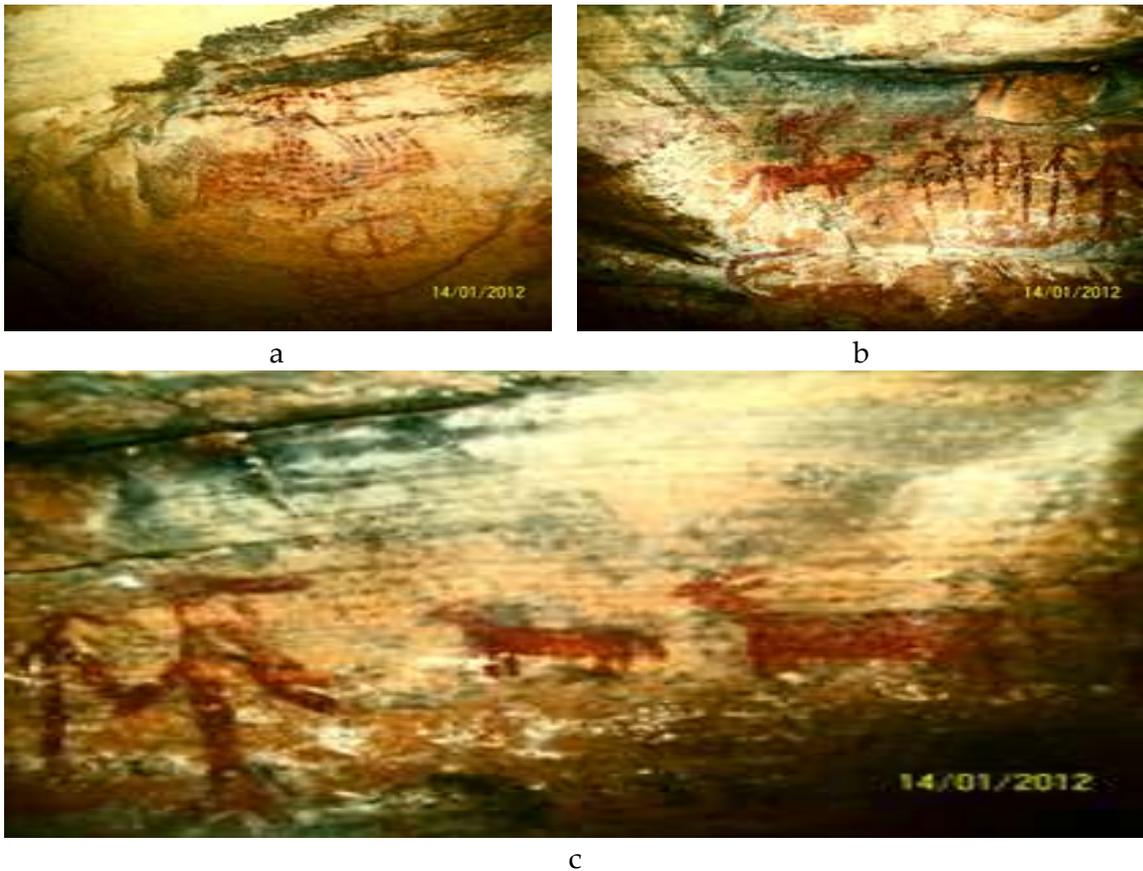


Figure 9a, b, c, and d: Showing pastoral scenes from Morhana CAR 10. Fig. a shows a man with a headdress and probably a stick-on top of a male buffalo, b and c show stick-figures of goat-herders

There is heavy superimposition among paintings at residential sites, with the most densely painted shelters displaying at least three to four strata of painting activity. White paintings are regarded as the final phase in northern Vindhyan rock art (Verma, 2012) since they lie over historically themed compositions executed in red ochres. In some places, yellow is the earliest, in others black, and ochres in others. Black and yellow paintings suggest residence at shelters since black is derived from wood charcoal and yellow from animal fat. The more skilled, large, and complex paintings are superimposed upon only exceptionally such as at Morhana Pahar CAR 14 shelter. But there may be some peripheral ones on their margins. Indeed the larger compositions, such as at Likhaniya Dari, Chuna Dari, Mukkha Dari, and Lekhania and

Morhana do not either superimpose on earlier ones. On the whole, later compositions maintain a healthy distance from earlier ones with superimposition created only upon small parts of earlier compositions.

Most superimpositions that exist in ochre paintings in residential shelters suggest a long continuous habitation, and there are several chronologically separate episodes of painting over each other on the same rock face. Juxtapositions or collages developing inadvertently too exist, sometimes entire panels painted as 'reaction' to earlier material, by its side, or just a single image, adding a sense of awareness of the past (Bradley, 2009). Larger compositions and smaller figures are drawn as a response to earlier paintings, not necessarily equally skilled nor aesthetic. Techniques of drawing human and animal figures are shared across sites (indigenous characters are given different body shapes and hairstyles). Frequent 'response drawings' to pre-existing ones give a sense of historical continuity at long-inhabited shelters. Practice drawings for perfecting intended images and paintings have been made evidently for evoking emotions and recording specific historical events.

Themes and Material Culture

Although the Vindhyan corpus of paintings is largely undated, based on existing archaeological evidence there is little doubt that types of subsistence techniques influenced thematical variation in rock art depictions. If thematic divergence on a synchronous plain exists, diachronic variations due to chronological differences also influence the selection of subjects, themes, colours, techniques, and occasionally perspectives. As addressed later, while themes may resolve best as chronologically evolving ones, generally speaking, the earliest paintings are of the hunting-gathering stage invariably involving animals, in solo or pairs or larger groups, animal hunt scenes, executed with some finesse, and in a range of colours black, ochre, yellow, and white. Many 'types' in sketches, drawings, paintings, and designs of humans and animals, as well as decorative figures, obtain. These range from simple line drawings, to drawings using geometric shapes like triangles, circles, and squares as basic building blocks are evident. The use of finger flutings, fine and broad brushes, and thin and thick styluses are detectable. Hand-stencils, paintings, and outlines, full-bodied paintings, use of lines, cross-hatchings, appear common to most sites.

The fauna depicted at a single or a group of shelters in particular localities like riversides or waterfalls is usually endemic or local, giving each site giving a regional flavour, although some types of fauna like deer and cattle are depicted at all the sites. Mukkha Dari, located on a naturally captive waterbody surrounded by cliffs, on the old course of the Belan, has freshwater dolphins, catfish, and other large fish, deer, antelope, Indian cattle, elephant; Wyndham Falls, wild goat, deer, dog, lizards, elephant, leopards, Equus; Likhaniya Dari, and Chuna Dari deer, antelope, elephants, monitor lizards; Morhana Pahar, monkeys, deer, domesticated goat and sheep, bison, cattle; and Lekhahia a plethora of deer, antelope, carnivores, buffaloes and Indian cattle. The Panchmukhi site, near the Sone River, has cattle, deer, antelope, and

rhinoceros. Kandakot, has mostly historical period depictions of elephants as part of royal retinues and marches of their soldieries.



Figure 10a and b: Paintings on smooth surfaces from WYN 4, Wyndham Falls, and CAR-10, Morhana Pahar, showing the use of styluses for drawing complex images accurately.

Material culture depictions exist in plenty too but mostly in the mesolithic paintings and after, and seem to evolve from simple to complex, from wooden sticks, spear, bows and arrows, lassoes and ropes, to steel swords, lances, and metal-tipped spears. Water-pots and pitchers, *behengi*¹, *palkis*², horse, bullock and camel-carts, riding-crops and sticks are also found depicted. Paintings of the iron age, the historical period, as well as the colonial period, depict scenes extraneous to local society.

Separate drawings of basic shapes like squares, triangles, circles, and lines are present at most painted sites within more complex imagery. We may suggest these are the basic shapes, or the building blocks, utilized from the very beginning, until the end, and not an evolutionary stage in Vindhyan paintings as commonly assumed (Varma 2012, 43). Their use also suggests that these shapes perhaps sit easily on the rock surfaces with the types of paints used in achieving the subjects chosen at the angles and heights at which paintings occur. Paintings show wide dexterity and skills at drawing and painting, from masterpieces to the very mundane, passable, and ordinary examples existing of the practice of rock art. There are masterful paintings, practice figures and drawings, paint smears and daubs, solitary lines, children's play figures and attempts, laboriously drawn intricate designs, and movement paintings with jocular and emotive content. The many layers of paintings, some parts painted over or erased for newer ones, suggest some rock shelters such as at Morhana Pahar and Mukkha Dari to have been inhabited for a very long time and rock surfaces to have served as community canvases.

Hunting-Foraging Themes

Hunting camps are usually transitory given the length of occupation which has notable seasonality and hence due to their cyclicity rock art is sparse in such locations as Wyndham Falls which yields the earliest date. It is also not usually placed on the smoothest surfaces nor in full visibility often inscribed in nooks and corners of

sandstone faces some vertically on low ceilings of minuscule but also significantly high rocky ledges. The Dhandhraul Sandstone, which has been most often used for paintings has a layered formation with often heavily leached and caliche-covered faces, yielding painting surfaces that vary from very rough and thick-grained, knobby, to extremely fine and smooth ones. The earlier paintings are distributed at significant distances in terms of shelters as well as surfaces on which they are inscribed, while their distances are also due to roughness of the surfaces selected. Paintings are done largely in hand and finger-strokes, as well as broad-brushes, as opposed to later ones on smoother surfaces in finer styluses.

Early paintings, such as at WYN 3 Site, are simple stick figures, lines, and line drawings, executed in finger-markings, in which squares, circles, triangles, arcs, and crosses prevail. Paint has been hand-filled in the case of flat wash compositions of which there are also many. In early rock art at Wyndham Falls, which dates to the terminal Pleistocene, it is also the case that the early human and animal figures are both schematically represented with a bare minimum of lines and finger-infilled paint such as mudstone ochre from which thin solutions of paint can be made.

Agro-Pastoral Themes

A set of imagery, possibly neolithic, in whom pastoral scenes involving sheep, goat, cattle, and buffalos occur. These are not shown being hunted, but painted elaborately and with care. Occasionally humans astride cattle and buffalo, horses, mules is found. Occasionally, bison, wild goat, and ass (*Hemionous khur*) are also depicted. Several types of deer and antelope are in evidence, canines like foxes, jackal, and wolves, langur monkeys, wild boar, elephants, and rhinos, with a few images of birds and fish also obtain.



Figure 11: A horse-carriage image superimpositions over three earlier periods of paintings at CAR 10

Rock art settlements seem to occur in the escarp area and lie along the several game-passes crisscrossing the area which connects Sone Valley with the Belan, Adwa, and Karamnasa Valleys and ultimately the Ganga Valley. Thus the game inhabiting all these valleys could migrate unhindered back and forth to and fro from all these valleys using the highlands as a winter grazing ground, which is where they were most successfully hunted and a select few later domesticated (Mandal, 2001). The use of a greater variety of colours in paintings exists including five shades of ochres and three other colours – white, black and yellow.

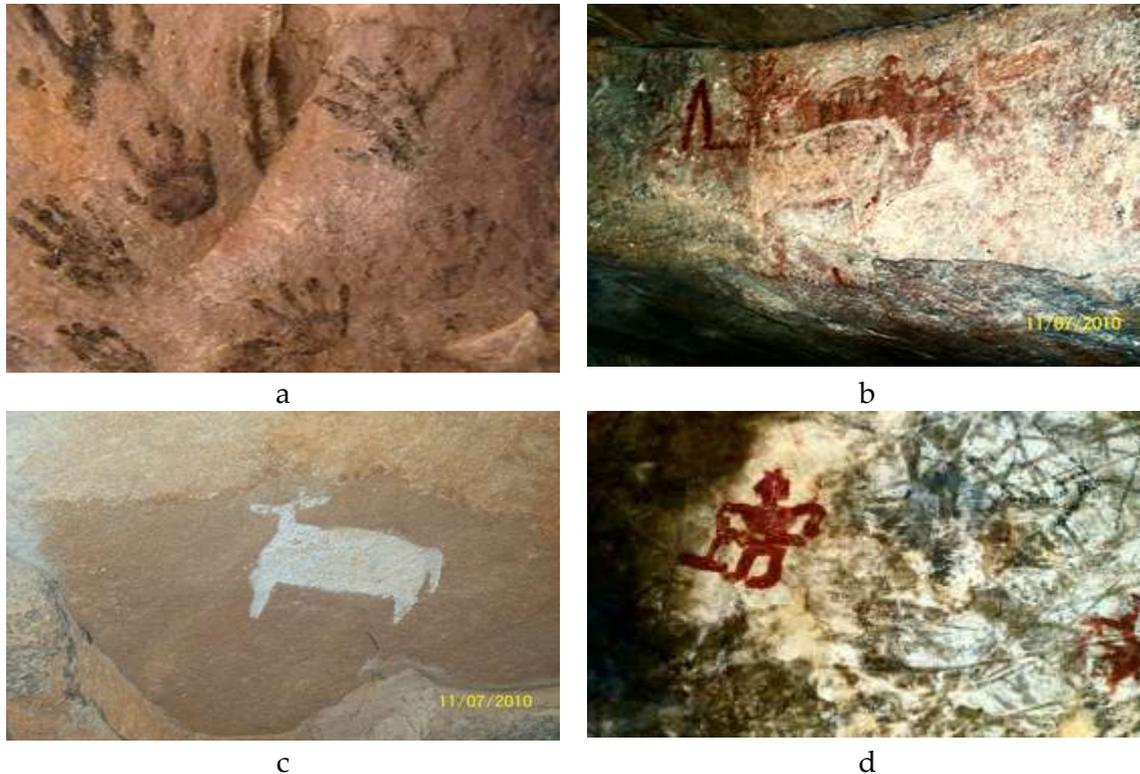


Figure 12a, b, c, and d: Hand imprints in black paint, possibly wood charcoal with a binder at CAR-16 Morhana Pahar. White paintings b and c made from crushed quartz with a binder, at CAR 8 and 9, Morhana Pahar. Fig. d is an image of a man holding a mallet or an axe from Likhaniya Dari.

Mass hunting of Gazelle or Black buck deer migrating during winters, floods, and the dry-season from the Sone Valley to the highlands in search of grazing, or crossing over to other lowland valleys through this cross-country route, provided optimal hunting to human groups inhabiting the highlands, during the middle to late Holocene. Owing to the rocky terrain in the scarp regions these areas were suitable for mass hunts, in narrow valleys of upland rivers like Garai, Karamnasa, Belan, and Adwa, and the meat was exchanged for grain. Spear hunts of selected species like elephants and nilgai and wild pigs.

Mass-traps for catching deer in significant numbers (Figures 7a and b) finds affirmation in Ghosh (1932) and Varma (2012). Ghosh suggests, “Nearby, are three deer

being driven into a trap by three men, one of whom is painted in black, a second in white and a third in white and red.” (Ghosh, 1932, 16). The whole point therefore of painting so many deer and other faunal images would also perhaps have been to advertise what was available for exchange to the lowlanders, later on including the hunt itself offered to them, for which panels such as at Likhaniya Dari and even Morhana Pahar serve as good examples. But a ‘surplus’ like this however ephemeral could be used for trade with anyone. Thus aiming for a lot of deer at a time had more relevance than the occasional one for food.

Iron Age and the Historical Period

Early iron-age and historical period paintings are distinguishable for more complex compositions through the use of brushes, styluses, and their narrative content. In cases they are superimposed upon earlier compositions, they give a sense of time-depth during which a shelter remained in use. Polishing of surfaces before painting took place is possible since grinding and polishing of tools in the Vindhyan neolithic is well-known. The straightness of lines in drawings, and uniformity in curves and angles, also suggest the use of styluses during this stage.

The widest colour use and range in rock paintings seem to be in existence during the iron age. For the region, the beginning of the use of iron is dated to around 1500 BCE. from which period over two dozen early ethnic iron-working centers have been discovered from the Sonbhadra region (Tewari, 2003, Tripathi, 2008). Earlier notices, say for Mirzapur, in the form of furnaces, slag and tuyeres also exist from Barkachcha (Carlleyle’s collection cited in Sieveking, 1960). Laterites, including banded and mudstone sources, are located in plenty in the Vindhya-Kaimur Ranges, which were fully exploited for the extraction of iron but also ochreous paints of various hues from bright orange, orange, red, reddish, and purple. A greater variety of other colours possibly with resin, vegetable dyes, and fat mixed in were also used.

Symbols of material objects help in the identification of the historical (broadly defined to include ancient, medieval as well as colonial period rock art) among the many paintings on rock surfaces. Stupa images, soldiers, metal swords and shields, horses, horseriders, and extensive depictions of bows and arrows, spears, and sticks appear in the historical period themes. Human imagery in the period separates itself into depictions about the daily lives of indigenous society (dancing etc.) and of the extraneous society (marching soldiers). Sometimes indigenous-looking figures hold material culture items identifiably associated with extraneous society like swords and shields.

Crowd scenes with mixed extraneous and indigenous people have people with indigenous hairstyles, usually in subaltern roles like haka-walas (game drivers), load bearers, food carriers, water carriers, mahouts, even sometimes as soldiers. Events extraneous to indigenous society are noticeable - soldiers, marching armies, elephant trapping expeditions, rhinoceros hunts on elephant backs, more material culture like swords, shields, incised drawings. Horse, camel, and bullock carts are depicted.



Figures 13a, b, c, d, e, and f: Figures a, b and c show various medieval scenes of soldiers with swords and shields, bows and arrows, elephant and horse riders at Likhaniya Dari. Figure d is an incised and inlaid with paint petroglyph at Likhaniya Dari. Figure e - two possible cupules on a painted surface at CAR-5, Morhana. Figure f is a horse-carriage of the colonial period drawing at Morhana CAR 10 shelter.

Occasionally, petroglyphs incised with iron tools also occur, such as at Morhana Pahar (CAR 5) and Likhaniya Dari (Figure 12d). The Morhana Pahar petroglyph is a cupule on a surface with cattle, deer, and design paintings (Figure 12e). The Likhaniya Dari image of a human flailing his arms is incised, with noticeable ridges, due to the incision, and inlaid with red ochre paint.

Varma (2012, 43) has attempted to outline the styles extant in the northern Vindhyan region and surmises "...Right from the beginning to the end of the painting activity. There was a gradual evolution in both style and technique of painting – from naturalistic to stylistic to symbolic and back to naturalistic." However, although his work includes exhaustive documentation of rock paintings of the Northern Vindhyas, these include the shelters mostly near the Sone Valley on the Robertsganj plateau facing the Sone Valley. Further, his use of the term style is restricted to just the mechanics of execution, and progressive differences among them, which no doubt are real, but do not include narratives among themes and their significance. Surprisingly, he suggests "narrative scenes are extremely rare in the North Vindhyan Region." (Varma 2012, 56). In our estimate, contrarily, most sites do have narratives in thematic paintings such as 'hunt scenes and 'trap scenes and 'processions', which he does refer to, but must be set into the proper perspective for interpreting their import.



Figure 14 a and b: Two panels with opposite directionality, but similar content, show the royal soldiery's capture of a wild elephant, presumably in the valley (at Likhaniya Dari) where it is painted at the LKH site, and the other, the return of the shikaris from the same event (at Chuna Dari) upstream on the same river valley. The two panels are two sites separated by a kilometer and the paintings depict some other fauna also probably hunted alongside – monitor lizard, deer, and large terrestrial birds.

Considerations on Style

Varma's identifications of the primary techniques for the execution of paintings are correct. He suggests that the naturalistic style consists of full images infilled with paint, which is the first technique that he calls flat wash or silhouette. The second technique he calls an outline, which means subjects sketched in outline, which also characterizes the naturalistic stage or period. This is followed by 'stylistic' by which is meant stylized (in contrast to naturalistic). The fourth technique he calls symbolic or cubist by which

he means the various basic geometric and curvi-linear shapes occurring by themselves, but are also found embedded in design elements, at all the sites. These basic shapes or symbols so-called, which we here argue are basic shapes serving as building blocks for more complex images, were also wrongly interpreted by Cockburn (1889) who went so far as to call shelters with a surfeit 'symbol caves'. The final style in Varma's reckoning is a 'return' to naturalism in the closing eras of rock paintings in the Vindhya, when presumably soldiers carrying swords and marching with large retinues of water-bearers, pack-bearers, food-bearers are shown.



Figure 15: Partial superimposition at CAR 16 giving a historical depth to paintings

Not mistaking techniques for styles, in our view just two styles of depicting human and animal forms, with some variations in themes and techniques, exist in two disparate geographical zones of the northern Vindhya. The first, and the less-discussed, is distributed East to West from promontories overlooking the Sone Valley, of the Kaimur near Vijaygarh, through to sites like Panchmukhi Hill, Bahuar, Kandakot, Rajapura and sites like Mukkha Dari of the Upper Belan Valley (Verma, 2012). Here the basic shapes used to depict humans, and sometimes animals, deploy ovoids, squares, and rectangles more frequently together with freehand, rather than a plethora of triangles, which typify drawings of the latter. There is a significant difference therefore in the appearance of images (See Figures 2a and 2b for the first style closer to the Sone and Belan Valleys and Figures 12 a, b, c, of the second style of the highland scarps and river valleys) among upper elevation sites like Likhaniya Dari, Chuna Dari, Wyndham Falls, Lekhahia, and Morhana Pahar.

The first style at Panchmukhi, Kanda Kot and Mukkha Dari has human and animal figures, executed rather differently, with a higher density of images. Hunting, fishing, and explicitly pastoral content with greater emphasis on human roles within them are

found. Human association in crocodile and rhino hunts, boats, spearing of fish are conspicuous, while the human association with domesticated species like *Bos gaurus* finds prominence. Human figures are drawn in an oval form which is a basic building block. Faunal depictions include deer, with their reproductive capacities, schools of fish, cattle, elephants, and buffalos all with full-body colouring.

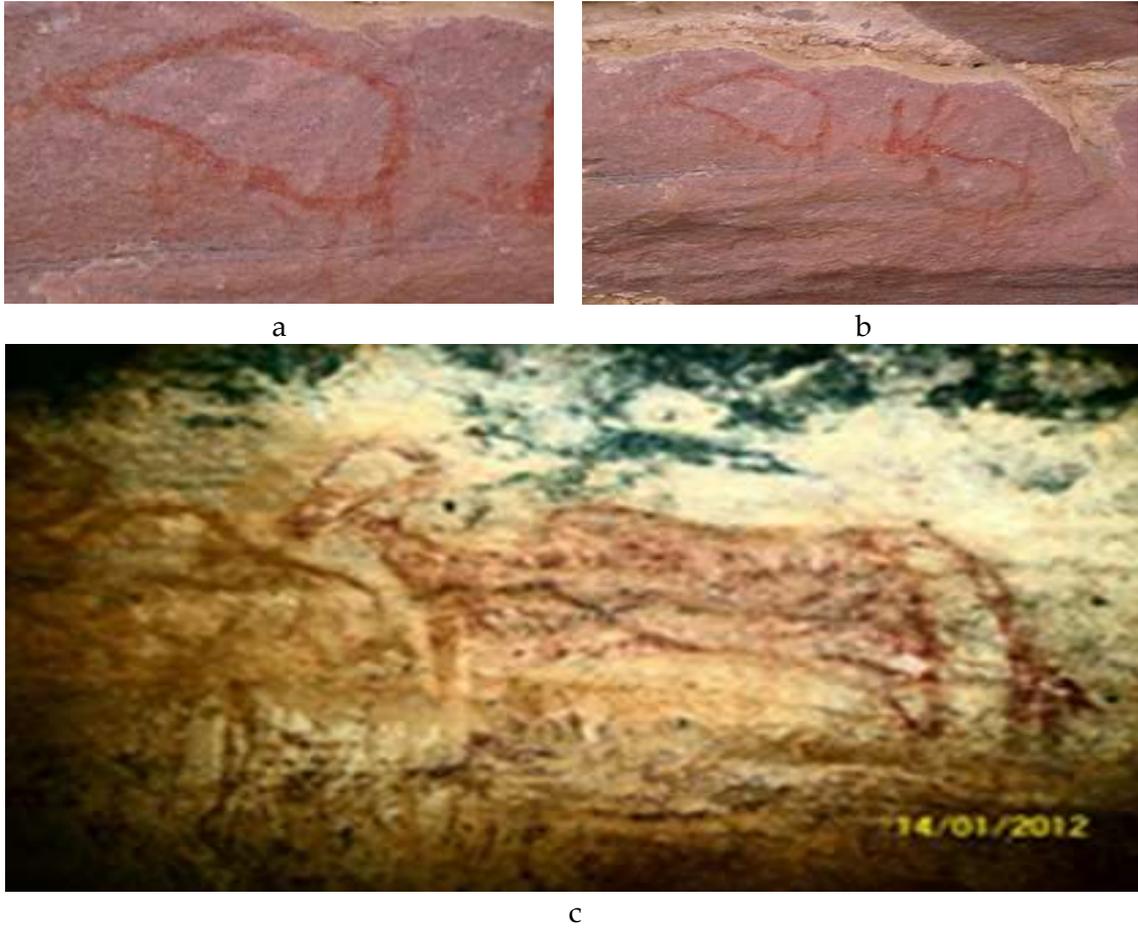


Figure 16 a, b and c: Practice drawings of a goat and a bullock, respectively at CAR 4 and 5, Morhana Pahar



Figure 17a and b: Men firing arrows at intruders at WYN 4-2 site

In contradistinction, in the second style group trapping scenes of deer and elephants predominate. The paintings of this area are nearly all at long-inhabited shelters or shallow and deep caves extending from a meter or two to five to ten meters. The paintings of the scarp area predominate in iron-age and historical period content showing royal soldieries, elephant capture expeditions, camel, horse, and bullock-carts. This is perhaps owing to their location closer to the Ganga plains and all the prominent roads and passes leading from the Sone and Belan and Adwa Valley, to the Ganga Valley. Yet prehistoric content in them is unmistakable. There is a presence of prehistoric tools in them too (Jayaswal, 1983, Misra, 2002, Pratap, 2016, Varma 2012).

Conclusion

Rock paintings in the Eastern India Vindhyan highlands begin from around the early Holocene, which is evidenced by microliths like lunates and crescents in the Vindhyan highlands in long inhabited shelters (Brandt et al. 1983, Jayaswal 1983, Mishra and Pal, 2002, Sharma, 1967, Varma, 1967). A continuity of habitation exists through the mesolithic, neolithic-chalcolithic to the iron age and the historical period. Ascertaining their precise chronology and lifestyles during periods co-terminus with painting activity, particularly neolithic onwards, is possible through the use of accurate dating methods and excavations await future projects. The depiction of human and animal forms clustering in rock art sites near each of the region's river valleys like the Sone, Belan, Adwa and Karamnasa rivers, differ marginally in form and content with those nestled next to Garai, Khajuri, and other higher elevation rivers. There are significant clusters of sites on the Morhana escarpment, Panchmukhi and Kandakot Hills which occur along now dry and defunct palaeolakes originally settled to exploit migrating elephant and buffalo herds, localized deer and other fauna, if not for full-time early pastoralism for which the scarplands with thorny bush forests were ideally suited, and where pastoralism continues to this day.

It was argued that the Eastern Vindhyan rock paintings have a regional stamp or a style with characteristic paints, flutings, and drawing techniques that have been used. The choice of various subjects also reflects the gender and age of painters and is often imbued with emotional content. These are conveyed through narratively charged murals and compositions that pertain to hunting, pastoral, and farming-related subjects. There are also include scenes from daily life, practice drawings, and movement murals. Paintings also have jocular content, and numerous amateurish children's drawings, also exist.

Regionally, variations arise in form and content and represent styles developed by separate groups inhabiting significant eco-niches and landscape components perhaps as statements of identity, to mark their native territories. Very likely this and these populations were themselves fissioned from the early Holocene populations migrating away from the Sone river basin. Stylistic distinctiveness of the Eastern Vindhyan paintings with those of other areas may also be predicated upon the frequent use of basic geometric shapes. Beyond the palaeolithic habitations known from the Sone and

Belan valleys, the founding of highland settlements was in pursuit of the game, along their established migration corridors from the valleys into the hills, during the terminal Pleistocene to late Holocene (Gibling et al. 2007, Mandal, 2001, Neudorf et al. 2014, Sharma and Clarke, 1983, Williams and Royce, 1982). In all likelihood that neolithic-chalcolithic settlements were uniformly located on the plateaus suited to agro-pastoral settlements, crops and cattle-stations, while the valleys continued to be visited for water, pasture, and hunting, leading to the continuation of painting activities on the scarps and highland drainage lines. In the Neolithic period, the rock art communities maximized returns from mass deer-trap hunts, as well as domestication. The technology for mass-traps for deer from acacia bush and thorn was used too for pastoral corrals in time, from their earlier use in trapping deer.

The depiction of trapping events involving gazelle or blackbuck deer in them suggest neolithic use of gorge areas from which deer were trapped in large numbers were possibly exchanged for goods required by indigenous societies. The location of this composition at the end of the valley which meets the roads coming from the plains suggests such a purpose. In the late historical- early medieval period, the Garai river was used for riverine trade and there are medieval watchtowers and trade posts in the vicinity of the Sukrit or the Likhaniya Dari valley with rock paintings. From here all the forest products and raw materials like stone and timber could be traded. Hence entries and exits to highland river valleys were sites for indigenous trade with the outside world. This also serves to explain the large-sized medieval paintings of elephant capture done by royal soldiers in the Garai River Valley (Figure 13a and b). In contradistinction with the promontory areas of Sone Valley, pastoral scenes here, in the inner scarps, show cattle, buffalos, sheep, and goats with human associations, suggesting these were more active locations for pastoralism, and early trade with the plains could have involved just such domesticated species.

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Notes

1. *Shoulder pole with harnesses at each end for carrying food or water usually held by a retinue of royal soldiers as seen in the region's rock art. The water was actually carried it is shown in earthenware pitchers as well as containers made from dried calabashes made pumpkin and other large gourds (still in use).*
2. *A should held box-like carriage for transporting people across, usually brides or important persona or the very elderly.*

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