
Labyrinths in Rock Art: Morphology and Meaning with Special Reference to India

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Abstract: *Labyrinths are enigmatic motifs with a common design strain noticed in rock art and other mediums like pottery, mosaic, coins etc. The word Labyrinth is derived from the Lydian word labrys which is a cult word introduced from Anatolia and means a double edged axe, a symbol of royal power etc. The labyrinth in some way can be considered as the successor of meanders and concentric circles with a corridor of access. In colloquial English, labyrinth is generally synonymous with maze. However, these two motifs have some essential differences in the fact that maze is multicursal and labyrinth is unicursal or a single non-branching path leading to its centre and back (wikipedia.org/wiki/Labyrinth). Labyrinths across time and space seem to have common character not only in their design but they also seem to share a common lineage in beliefs, myths, legends and rituals. In India, they are found depicted in rock art and even created today as part of certain rituals and also found to be erected in association with megaliths. This paper tries to assess the morphology and meaning of this motif.*

Keywords: Labyrinth, Rock Art, India, Concentric Circles, Classical Seven Courses, Aberrant, Megaliths

Introduction

The concept of the labyrinth has an association with Knossos, and the Mino's society, which collapsed in the middle of the 15th century BC. There is a tale involving the King Minos of Crete creating a labyrinth beneath his palace to house the Minotaur, a half bull-half man. The graphic drawing of the labyrinth is already well-defined and precise on a Minoan board (13th century BC, during the critical moment) (Buchanan 2007: 10).

The labyrinth design however goes much earlier than this. The oldest dated rock art representations of labyrinths found on the rock surfaces at Winnemucca Lake, Nevada, USA dates back to 10,500-14,800 BP (Benson *et.al* 2013). Some of the labyrinth design and sun motifs from Winnemucca are similar to those observed on slabs of Bronze Age Megalithic tombs and rock surfaces in England, Ireland, Norway, Sweden and Italy (Coles and Harding 1979: 175-176, 264). In England, studies conducted indicate that some of the labyrinth carvings have their origin during Neolithic period and they survive into the early Bronze Age (4000BC-1800BC) (Saward 2001: 21-27; Mazel *et.al*.

2007:231-238). United State America, Mexico, Peru and different countries in Asia too have a rich share of labyrinth representations in rock art. In India, labyrinths have been found depicted as petroglyphs and pictographs in rock art represented on open rocks, caves/shelters and megalithic monuments etc. Labyrinths continue to be created by some communities as part of their ritualistic belief and practices. This clearly indicates that labyrinths go beyond the association with the King of Minos and they have an independent existence and meaning.

Labyrinth designs apart from rock-art have also been noticed on pottery, basketry, mosaic and even body art (Buchanan 2007: 10). They occur as single circles, concentric circles and as an intricately connected circle with a common pathway. Single circles are the simplest, but many a times they occur along with concentric circles. The centre of the circles are often clearly demarcated by a blotched dot or circle and in some, a cord is depicted leading into its centre and hence the meaning the envisaged and conveyed by these varied representations does not appears to be much deviant. From field studies conducted it was observed that ritualistic concentric circle representations even today do not seem to have a constant number of circles and vary according to perceptions of its creator from single to as many as twelve. The most stabilised and popular or the 'classical' labyrinth design observed across continents is the intricately connected seven-course labyrinth with a common continuous pathway to the centre and back with a cross like symbol at its mouth extending into the centre.

This paper attempts to analyse and classify the labyrinths reported from India morphologically and tries to assess its possible meaning from published sources, vogue belief and practices. From the varied nature and places of its execution, labyrinth design appears to have some magico-religious affiliation. The most common strain of belief associated with labyrinths universally appears to be an affiliation with death, redemption, sun and the cosmos.

Morphology

Labyrinths have a vast distribution in India and are found from Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir to Udupi in south Karnataka and in the east up to Assam and Manipur. Typologically labyrinths can be tentatively divided into four namely; uni-circle, concentric circles, aberrant and the 'classical' circular seven-coursed. Though variant in size and designs the labyrinth motif seems to harbour the same connotation.

Uni-Circular Labyrinth

The uni-circular labyrinths are seen in rock art singularly or along with concentric circles. Examples of it occur as a petroglyphs on an open rock surface at Bomai village in Sopore District, near Srinagar (Fig. 1), Kudopi in Sindhudurg district of Maharashtra (Figs. 2a & 2b), and from Karkunje, near Mookambika, Udupi district, Karnataka etc., (Fig. 3). The uni-circular labyrinths at Sopore are shallow in carvings and the hub of the circle has a spot or a blotch created by etching or grooving. In Sopore there are at times two lines approaching the outer circle of the labyrinths. The semantics of line in

ascending or descending movement is considered as intangible cord of connectivity with the intangible eternity (Harrod 2007 326). There are also some associated human and animal motifs carved here and they appear to date to Neolithic-Megalithic period (Kumar and Mishra 2015:113). At Kudopi there are a variety of labyrinths. Uni-circular labyrinths are shown as simple roundels with the hub demarcated as a circular depression in the rock. There are also elliptical circle with two drop shaped relief pointing towards each other (Lalit 2015: 386-387). At Karkunje too there are single and multi-circular ones (Murugeshi 2015: 431, Figures 4, 5, 6). In style and treatment, the labyrinths from these sites discussed above recall similar ones from Ketley-Crag north Cumberland and McConkey Ranch, Vernal, Utah, USA etc (Figs. 4 & 5). The major difference in the representation from the two sites when compared to the one in Sopore is the existence of a cord running into the hub of the circle.



Figure 1: Uni-circular and Multi-circular labyrinths at Sopore (Courtesy: A. Mishra)

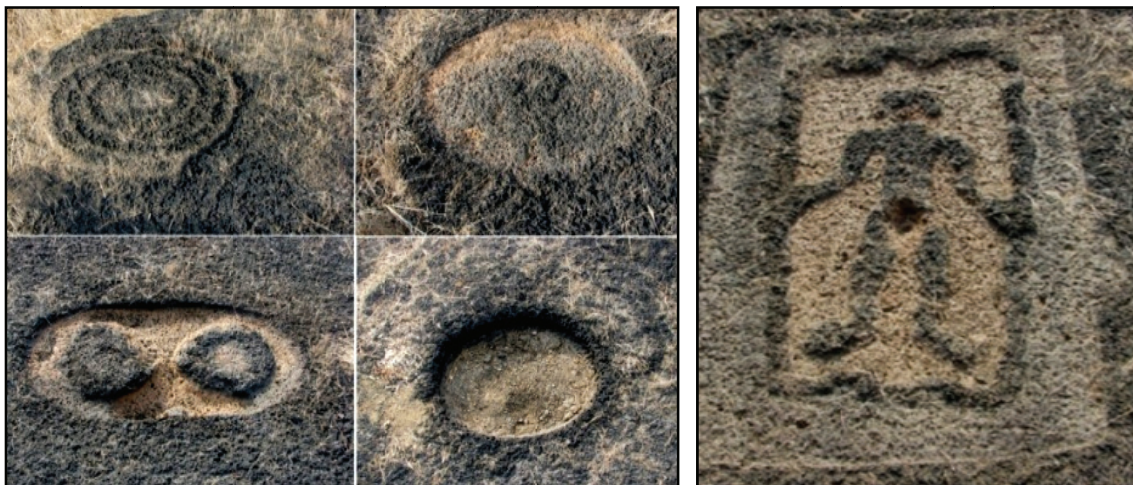


Figure 2a & 2b: Circle motifs and oblong circle with anthropomorphic figure at Kudopi (Courtesy: Satish Lalit)



Figure 3: Labyrinths from Karkunje (Courtesy: Murugeshi)



Figure 4: Labyrinths Ketley-Crag (Courtesy: www.rockartblog.blogspot.com)



Figure 5: McConkey Ranch Vernal, Utah (Courtesy: www.rockartblog.blogspot.com)



Figure 6: Human figure in a circle from a Menhir in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand (Courtesy: A. Mishra)

In India, some uni-circular labyrinths have a human figure or figures lying prostrate in the centre and they come from Ladakh, Palani hills, Kudopi (Fig. 2b) and Hazaribagh (Fig. 6). Anthropomorphs similar to Kudopi are noticed at Usgalimol, Goa and are dated to Megalithic period (Nambirajan 2015:395). At Hazaribagh and Palani hills, circles with human representation have been found respectively on menhir and dolmens of megalithic period. There are stone cut anthropomorphic figures associated with megaliths burials reported from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. At Mottur in Tamil Nadu, the anthropomorphic figure is placed within three concentric circles and similar scheme is also noticed at Udayarnattam and at both sites they are also associated with megalithic burials (Singh 2008: 252 and Narasimhaiah 1980: 220). There are many megaliths in India and abroad associated with stone circles and cairn circles and in the centre of which occurs the burial remains. Megalithic structures and

their association with the sun and the cosmos are being discussed fervently in academic circles across the globe especially in England and India (www.megalithics.com; www.megalithic.co.uk and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archaeoastronomy>). Megalithic tombs designed as spirals, disc/wheel similar to that observed in rock art have been reported from Arakaim (Russia), Aberdeenshire (UK) Uppland and Gotland in Northern Europe and possibly share the same ideas. In southern Europe, the Bronze Age tombs at Castelluccio near Sicily they have their doorways blocked with stone carved with spiral designs (Coles and Harding 1979: 503 and 175).

Chakraverty has reported petroglyphs and pictographs from Jharkhand where human figures are encircled within cupules arranged circularly and has close association with megaliths and megalithic rituals practiced by Santhals and Bhumij tribes residing in the area (Chakraverty 2014: 61-63, Fig.3.15). The human figure possibly represents the dead individual in whose honour the monument is erected. In some instance, the dead person is replaced by the symbol 'cross-in-circle' and sometimes the 'cross-in-circle' also occurs together with human figures possibly denoting the dead, as evidenced from rock art pictographs from Bihar and Karnataka which we shall discuss below. Monolithic stone cruciform associated with megalithic burials have been reported from Kaperlaguru, Malur and Katapru on the banks of Godavari by William King and Mulheran. Like the anthropomorphic figures, the stone cross possibly denotes the dead (c.f. Narasimhiah 1980: 202-203). An interesting research conducted recently also permeates the opinion that the symbol of 'cross or plus in circle' denotes the dead (Tiwary 2013).

Concentric Circle Labyrinths

In rock art of India, concentric circle labyrinths occur as petroglyphs and pictographs and the number of circles varies from two to seven. Among these, three circled and seven circled labyrinths are popular. It is interesting to note that in all forms of representations they have their hub clearly demarcated as a circular blotch, dot, circle or cupules.

Concentric circle labyrinth occurs as petroglyphs at Sopore and they have two to three rings around the hub (Fig. 1). Another, petroglyphs from Khoupum shelter in Manipur has seven rings (Fig. 7) (Kunjeshwari & Singh 2015: 315, figure 6). Concentric circles as pictograph occurs at Rasulpur near Agra and it too has seven concentric circles (Fig. 8) (Pradhan 2015: 127, figure 2). The largest concentric circle pictograph is from Osari Ghat hill, in Chand Block of Khaimur district, Bihar (Fig. 9) (Kumar and Tiwary 2014: 276). This representation is painted on the ceiling of the cave in red ochre. It probably had seven outer circles, of which five are clearly visible today. Seven smaller concentric circles with dot in its centre denote the hub of the large labyrinth. Leading into the hub is a ladder and a cord over running it. The ladder depiction seems to be earlier of the two. It is interesting to note that the artist has brought an intentional structural difference in the painted ladder before and after its entry into the labyrinth. Before its

entry into the labyrinth it has a rather thickened chequered design and after entering it, the ladder broadens and becomes thinner. The cord however seems to have an uniformity and it bifurcates outside and runs over the ladder into a smaller labyrinth below the central one. There are labyrinths as petroglyphs with a cord running into its hub from many sites in England and America. Cords and ladders depicted in the scheme are considered to be means to ascend the heaven (Kumar 2015: 70).



Figure 7: Seven ringed petroglyph comes from Khoupum, District Tamenglong, Manipur
(Courtesy: ignca.nic.in)



Figure 8: Painted seven ring labyrinth Rasulpur rock shelter
(Courtesy: Arakhita Pradhan)

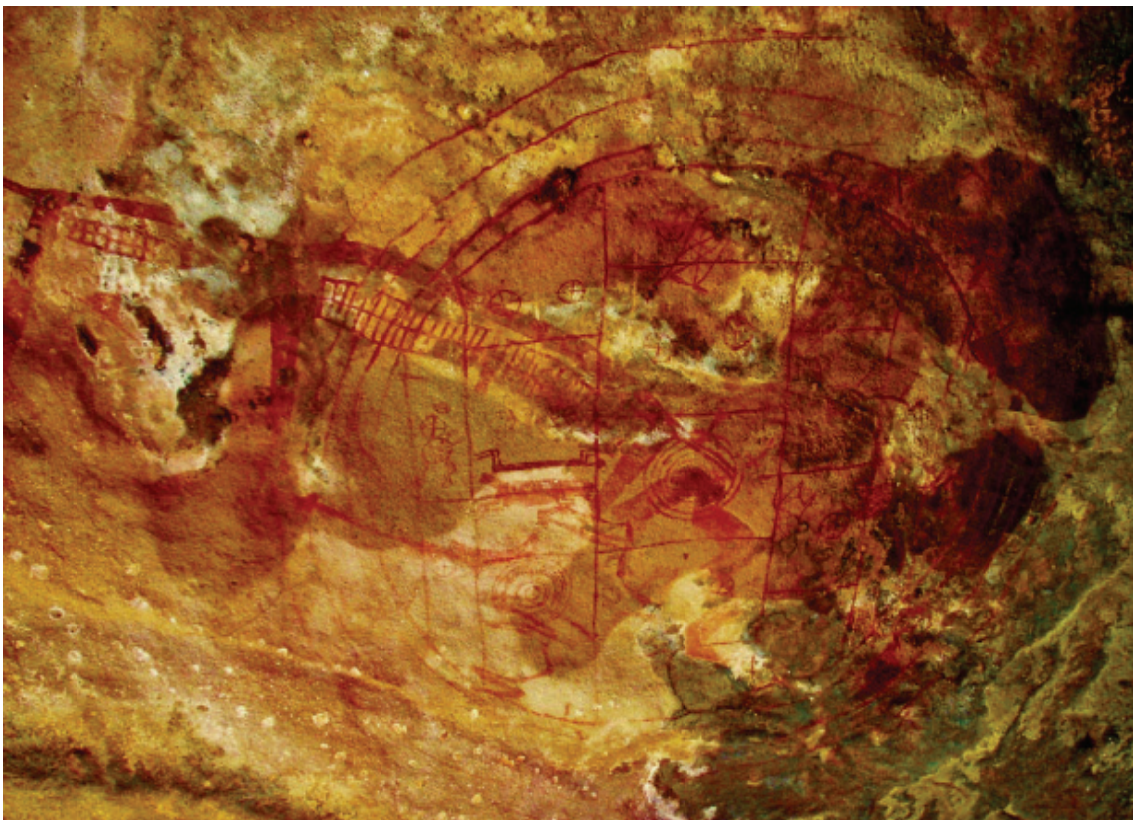


Figure 9: Multi-circular labyrinth from Osari Ghat hill, in Chand Block of Khaimur district, Bihar (Courtesy: Sachin Tiwary)

The space within the large labyrinth is divided into quadrates. In some quadrates the 'plus-in-circle' motif, is noticed and as stated above it seems to have connotation with dead individual or soul. The labyrinth at Osari Ghat hill could have been painted anywhere along the wall of the cavern, but it is intentionally painted by the creator on the ceiling of the cave as though to denote the cosmos or heaven which in belief is located up in the sky. The nature and contents of the depicted multi-circular labyrinth indicates that it was social endeavour rather than of a single family. Apparently each quadrant was assigned to a family or its member. Human stick like figures lying prostrate and the 'plus-in-circles' symbols is also repeated at Anegudi (discussed below) and possibly denotes the dead souls who found redemption in heaven, represented by the labyrinth. There are some animals with their bodies painted with chequered lines possibly to denote that they were sacrificed. As part of death and megalithic practices even today the Chekhesangs of Manipur sacrifice buffalos or pigs to be served in the 'feast-of-merit' (Devi 2014:405). It is interesting to note that this cave, even now is associated with death rituals of the ethnic groups inhabiting the area and not frequented by villagers (Kumar and Tiwary 2014: 278).

Aberrant Variety

The aberrant varieties of labyrinths found from India are very interesting in their representational scheme. Here, we discuss a few of them. A pictograph depicting an aberrant labyrinth comes from Onake Kindi, near Anegudi or Chik Rampur on the left bank of Tungabhadra, Karnataka (Fig. 10a & 10b) (Sundara 2006: 45). Though faded it is a very interesting. The lower half of the circle has a series of lines radiating from its outer edge and in the upper half there are 13 conical projections with a median stalk. It appears that the softer lines in the lower half denote the moon and the bolder conically designed upper ones possibly denote the sun. It is interesting to note that the sun and moon are still depicted in sepulchral tablets created by tribes in Jharkhand and Orissa. Sun and moon are also found on hero-stones and seem to draw simile with the celestial eternity associated with them (Chakraverty 2014: vol. II. 58-59). Some sects of mystics-Orphic or Pythagorean-taught that the spirits of the dead depart to dwell in the moon or to shine among the constellations. In Plato's view souls return to inhabit the heavenly bodies, which served as their dwelling place before birth and there partake of the bliss of a divine existence (c.f. Cumont 1912: 96).

In the interior, thirteen smaller circles with a dot at its hub are arranged in a larger circular formation. There is a ladder motif running almost vertically across the centre of the circle. In the centre, to the left of the ladder is prostrate person, possibly denoting the deceased. Possibly to reassert he denotes the dead a 'cross or plus in circle' symbol is shown between his widely placed legs. The ladder and its rungs have clear structural demarcation. The rungs of the ladder at the lower end before it enters the inner circle are thicker and distantly placed. However, as it enters the inner area it becomes thinner and the rungs get closely placed and run into the inner circle. Similar differentiation was also observed in the ladder running into the labyrinth at Osari Ghat. As stated earlier ladder and rope was a mode to access heaven. It has been stated that this

labyrinth representation recalls a megalithic stone circle. Megalithic burials are observed close to this site. Petroglyphs of labyrinths with ladder running into it has also been reported from Barsmishaw stone and Panorama stone from west Yorkshire, England (Fig. 11) dating back to the Bronze Age, around third millennium B.C. (http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/era/section/record_manage/rm_projects_csi_motifs.jsf#ladder; and Coles and Harding 1979: 175-176, 264-Fig.96).

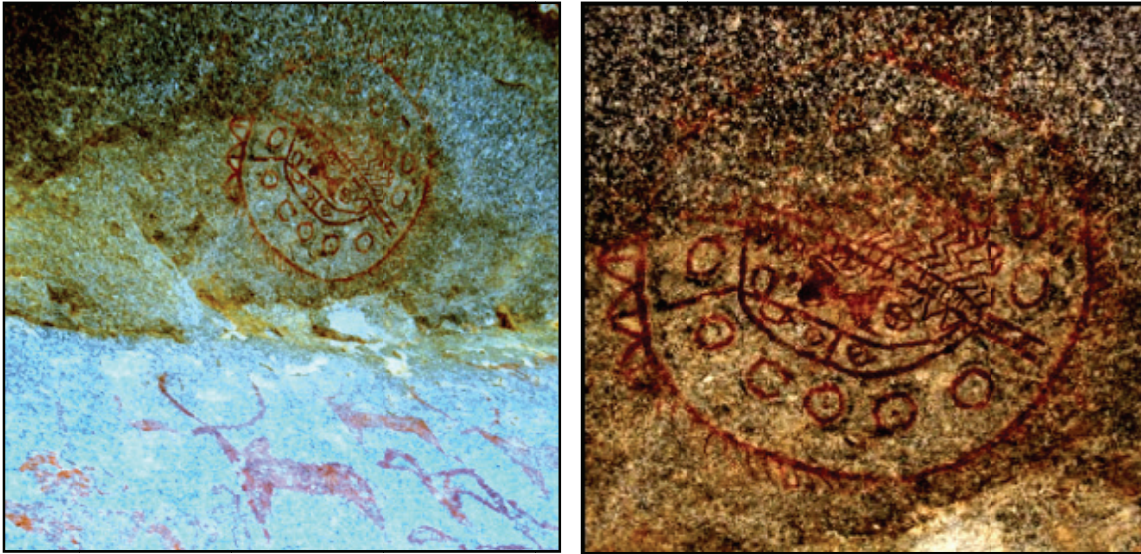


Figure 10a and 10b: Chik Rampur (Courtesy: Srikumar M. Menon)

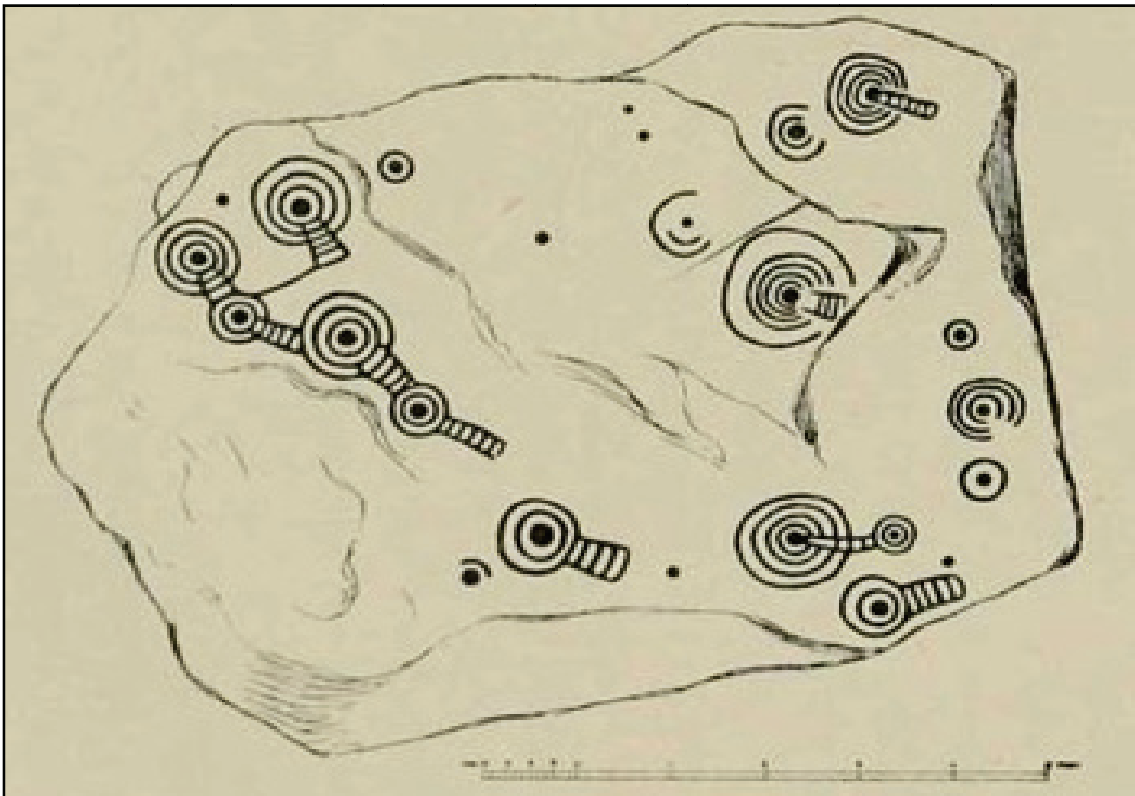


Figure 11: Panorama stone (Courtesy: <http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk>)

As pictographs there is an aberrant labyrinth from the site of Jharnawa Rani Gadar in Jharkhand. It depicts two human figures possible dead, encircled by circles within a quadrangle and also circles placed in a round around a quadrangular enclosure (Fig. 21). There are also other representations of dead with cupules surrounding it from the same area, clearly synchronizing the association of the dead with the circular labyrinths like formations. However, what is interesting is that there is continuity of tradition among the Mundas from the Jharkhand region. The priest of this tribe during their sepulchral rituals draw a simple anthropomorphic figure on the floor with rice floor and vermilion and a turmeric piece is placed on it to denote bones or deceased. Small circles are drawn around the centrally designed anthropomorphic representation and they are then filled with offerings like food, liquor, tobacco and blood of a sacrificed animal or fowl etc. A pictographic representation of this belief and practice is recorded in rock art of Ghatsila and ISCO rock art sites (Chakraverty 2014: 63-64, Fig.3.15: Fig. 20). This sepulchral ritual of drawing circles can be linked to the labyrinth and initiation of entry into it in the concept of *mandala* (Elaide 1952: 52-53).

One very interesting aberrant labyrinth from Dharkundi Jogi Ki Gufa shelter in Panchmarhi is modelled after a lotus (Dubey-Pathak 2015: 245 figure 6). The lotus is outlined in dark red lines and recalls a labyrinth in its form and execution (Fig. 12). It has the essential characters of the labyrinth in the fact that it is almost circularly conceived and the lower stalk and upper floral part is intricately woven together and executed as a single line and an open space is left connecting the two portions towards the bottom. Within the lotus is a 'plus-in-circle' possibly denoting the dead soul who has attained redemption in the heaven or realm of the gods possibly denoted by the lotus. To the bottom, are depictions of some painted stupas which overlap the lower stalk of the lotus. The overlap indicates that it was apparently executed later than the lotus labyrinth. There are also some handprints in red above the lotus labyrinth. It is not sure if there is any association between the motifs at the site. Overlaps and variant styles possibly indicate different periods of execution. In Hindu mythology Lotus has a close association with Surya the Sun god and heaven. In Buddhist, Jain and Hindu beliefs lotus has a divine association. Places where Jain saints attained liberation are marked by full blown lotuses carrying footprints and enclosed within a square frame, like the ones at Chandragiri hill, Sravanabagola, Karnataka (Fig. 13), Virasikhamani hills, near Sendamaram, Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu etc., (Fig. 14) These depiction attests of the close connection between lotus, cosmos and redemption (www.jainpedia.org). This representation recalls the concept of *mandala*.

There is an aberrant variety of labyrinth engraved on the chest of an anthropomorphic figure in Edakkal shelter, Wayanad, Kerala (Fig. 15). This figure possibly denotes a shaman. Shamans in their state of trance are supposed to even enter the realm of the gods to find some power or objects to battle evil spirits (Pollack 2004: 2-5). It is not clear if the Edakkal figure with the labyrinth on the chest represents the state of the shaman realising his objective of reaching or attaining the realm of gods or heaven, metaphysically. There is a stencilled human figure with hazily depicted feet and

labyrinths carved close to it from Karkunje near Udupi (Fig. 16) (Murugeshi 2015 430, figure.2). Whether the close association of the human figure with labyrinths indicate the shamanistic accession to heaven is left to ponder.



Figure 12: Dharkundi Jogi Ki Gufa shelters in Panchmarhi hills (Courtesy: Meenakshi Dubey-Pathak)



Figure 13: Jain footprints within lotus at Chandragiri hill, Sravanabelagola (Courtesy: Srikumar M. Menon)



Figure 14: Virasikhamani hills, near Sendamaram, Tirunelveli

Some interesting aberrant labyrinth designs come from the north-eastern states too. A labyrinth from Khoupum Tamenglong, Manipur shows a seven coursed labyrinth with a mouth that opens to the bottom flanked by two wings like formation on either side

(Kunjeshwari and Singh 2015: 316) (Fig: 16). This labyrinth in design is extremely similar to the ones observed at Knowth, Ireland (Fig: 17). Adjoining the labyrinth is depicted a 'plus-in-circle' and possibly a crescent moon. The plus in circle as stated above appears to be a symbol denoting the dead. The labyrinth and crescent moon seems to indicate the cosmos.



Figure 15:
Edakkal Figure



Figure 16: Karkunje Figure
(Courtesy: T. Murugeshi)



Figure 17: Khoupum Tamenglong
District Manipur (Courtesy: Kunjeswari,
K. L. and S. S. Singh)



Figure 18: Labyrinth from Knowth,
Ireland (courtesy: www.ancient-wisdom.com/labyrinths)

Another interesting aberrant labyrinth design comes from Umatumani Islands, Assam (Fig. 19). Here, there are representations of the typical 'classical' seven coursed labyrinths associated with square labyrinths (Kunjeshwari and Singh 2015: 317). The square labyrinth seems to have passage from all four sides and each of them blocked by a plus design intricately connected with the whole labyrinth design. It is interesting to note that the plus design is also observed at the mouth of the typical 'classical' seven coursed labyrinth and both these seem to have the same connotation. The classical seven coursed labyrinth along with a square ones have been also reported from Tar Lahaut, Pakistan (Fig. 20) (Kalhoro 2015: 58). There is a pictograph of aberrant quadrangular labyrinth from Jharnawa Rani Gadar, Jharkhand. Here, two figures are encircled by small circles within a quadrangle which is again encircled by larger circles (Fig. 21). The occurrence of the circular and quadrangular labyrinths together seems to convey that they also carry the same connotation.



Figure 19: Umatumani Island: Assam
(Courtesy: Kunjeswari K. L. and S. S.Singh)

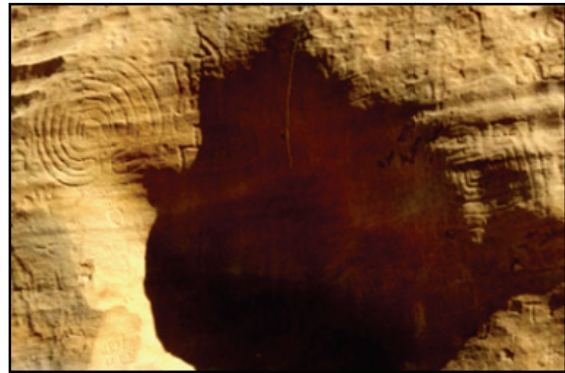


Figure 20: Labyrinth from Tar Lahaut, Pakistan
(Courtesy: Zulfikar Ali Kalhoro)



Figure 21: Pictograph Jharnawa Rani Gadar, Jharkhand
(Courtesy: Somnath Chakraverty)

Classical Seven Course Labyrinth

The most widely distributed labyrinth is the classical seven course labyrinth. They are observed from Ladakh in the north to Assam-Manipur in the east and Goa in the west. The earliest classical seven course labyrinth representation in Europe apparently dates back to the Bronze Age and has been reported from Rocky Valley in UK (Fig. 22) and Val Camonica, Italy (Coles and Harding 175-176).



Figure 22: Rocky Valley (Courtesy Seward, www.labyrinthos.net)



Figure 23: Labyrinth, Tangtse, Upper Ladakh (Courtesy: Taillefer and Laurianne)



Figure 24: Labyrinth at Usgalimol (Courtesy: www.parrikar.com)



Figure 25: Labyrinth, Golka Maan shelter, Bihar (Courtesy: Sachin Kr. Tiwary)

The classical unicursal seven course labyrinth has a continuous pathway to the centre and back. It is supposed to have its mouth opening to the bottom. At the mouth of the labyrinth is a cross like formation which is intricately connected with the labyrinth as a whole. From north India, we have a unicursal seven coursed labyrinth from Ladakh created as a petroglyph on an open boulder (Fig. 23). Adjoining it to the left is two conjoined elliptical formation possibly denoting feet and a series of possibly intentional marking leading to the mouth of the labyrinth, apparently denoting an entry into it. A seven course unicursal labyrinth occurs at Usgalimol/Pansaimol, Goa as a petroglyph on lateritic stone (Fig. 24). Here too, there is the conjoined elliptical feet representation adjoining the labyrinth. These conjoined elliptical representations are intentional and possibly denote the deceased soul (denoted by the feet), gaining redemption in heaven (denoted by the labyrinth) (Kumar 2014: 277). Spirals or labyrinths associated with

ladder, human feet etc., have been reported from Irish rock art sites belonging to the Bronze Age and these carving on stone and burial monuments were attempts to influence or commemorate events (Coles and Harding 263-264). Opinions have also been raised stating that the Goa labyrinth represents the *chakravyuha* formation narrated in the *Mahabharata* (Nambirajan 2015: 394). There are other associated motifs along with the labyrinth at the site and none of these motifs seems to betray any connection with episodes narrated in the *Mahabharata* and hence the opinion appears invalidated.

There are very interesting and perfectly carved seven course labyrinths as petroglyphs from Umatumani Island, Assam (Fig. 19) and Golka Maan shelter, Rohtas Plateau, *Chhamahiya* hill, Sasaram Block, Bihar (Fig. 25). There are three symbols carved in a group (Fig. 24). One is an elliptical circle at the right end, two conjoined squares at the centre and a labyrinth to the left end. Stylistically and technically the three motifs appear to share a coherency and hence seems to have been done at the same time. The elliptical formation with two elongated formation within it have circularly demarcated ends. This formation inside is intricately and inseparably connected with the outer ring. The conjoined representation within the circle possibly denotes two deceased souls. There is a single elliptical labyrinth with two oval formations within it from Kupodi, discussed above. Circles with dead persons demarcated within it are also reported from Jharkhand and Tamil Nadu (Chakraverty 2014: 63, Fig.3.15). Thus, apparently the two elongated symbols within the same circle possibly denote or commemorate a pair of people who encountered death together. Adjoining the symbol is two squares, one of it has a 'V' shaped mark within it which possibly denotes female genitalia or indicates that one of the deceased was a female (Coy 1997:157).

The Korku tribe living in Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh have a tradition of carving commemorative/memorial wooden tablets depicting occupation and identifying character of the deceased person along with revered symbols of sun and moon (possibly denoting their presence in heaven) (Chakraverty 2014: vol. II.58-59). The symbolic square tablet like representations carved adjoining the dead twin represented in the circle recalls of the tradition among the Korku tribe. The seven layered labyrinth carved adjoining the squares seem to denote heaven to which the deceased souls gained redemption or ascended together. The seven coursed labyrinth supports the belief that the heaven was seven in number. One of the meanings of the labyrinth is obviously connected with heaven and redemption (Buchanan 2007:11).

Structural Labyrinths

Apart from rock art, structural labyrinths have been found associated with megaliths burials in peninsular India. There are many megalithic stone circles reported from various parts of India. Many megalithic stone circles with cairn packing and burials towards its centre, seems to carry a connotation with cosmos and heaven as noticed in labyrinth representation in rock art. There are megalithic dolmens and cairn burials from Iralabanda (Fig. 26), Kadiriraya Cheruvu, Sogadaball and Edu Chutla kota

(district Chittoor, Rayalaseema, of Andhra Pradesh) that have seven stone concentric circles created by slabs placed around them. The last three sites were reported by Ramabrahmam (Ramabrahmam and Challa 2015 266-267). At the site of Edu Chutla kota in the same district a dolmen is placed centrally within a quadrangular labyrinth like creation around it (Fig. 27). It is interesting to note that these seven courses circular and square formations around the burials simulate labyrinths in rock art. Since the seven circles are directly associated with burial tombs placed in their centre they do seem to have connotation with the vogue belief and concept of seven heavens, in some communities. It will be interesting to note some of the oldest and organised forms of circular labyrinths noticed in Native American, Celtic and Rabbinical faith are circular and seven coursed (Stein 1987:185).



Figure 26: Iralabanda district Chittoor District (Courtesy: Y. M. Lee)



Figure 27: Educhutla Kota, Tirtham village, Chittoor (Courtesy: V. Ramabrahman)

Discussions

Possibly the earliest cup marks, spirals, labyrinths and sun symbols are found from Winnemucca Lake as petroglyphs dating back to 10,500-14,800 BP (Benson *et.al* 2013). Spirals and Labyrinths start appearing on rock and megalithic monuments from Bronze Age and occur in a host of sites from Europe. In studies conducted on the rock art at Val Camonica by Anati, one of the principle element in 'Camunian religion' was observed to be the cup, ring, wheels and disc with rays etc., and they considered to represent the solar disc or sun-motif, with strong cosmological connotation (c.f. Coles and Harding 1975). Concentric circles, sun symbols and labyrinths possibly with the same connotation have also have been reported from United State of America, Mexico, Peru and some Asia countries, including India. What connects labyrinths across time and space is not only their shared design but also essential myths, legends and rituals associated with them.

The exact origin and belief of the labyrinths are lost in obscurity. These beliefs may be as old as mankind itself and its transmutation to a graphic creation was an apparent actualisation of these long concurrent beliefs. There is however no debate on the issue that labyrinths essentially belongs to the phenomenology of religion. Many of the symbols related to religion have their origin in the cosmological range-the sky, the celestial bodies and traffic between gods between heaven and earth. They bear a sacred nature in their association with sun and cosmos (Capps 1995: 127). In Rome there was a strong belief that after death the soul ascends to the celestial or astral sphere (Cumont 1911 92)

The common and rather universal belief considers heaven to be located in a physical space high above the earth or in the cosmos where in dwelt gods, angels, deities and venerated ancestors. It is considered to be multilayered and beyond the universe. Hence heaven came to be represented with celestial objects like sun, moon, and stars and or as rings or circles etc. Labyrinth appears to be one symbol or motif that came to synchronize into it the concept of Sun/multilayered cosmos/heaven and the actualization of dead within it. Hence, one of the meanings of the labyrinth is redemption and ascent to the heaven (Buchanean 11). Heaven was the final destination and a common goal in the ethos of mankind's belief universally, and an essence of all religious beliefs and practices. However, this accent to heaven could not be achieved quickly but it had to pass through different stages of progressive elevation or ascent and to denote this feature labyrinth becomes an ideal symbol (Petz 2008:17). Aspects symbolised and conveyed by Labyrinths are also reflected in structural monuments erected for the dead and in death rituals vogue among the tribal communities in India. In all these there is strong connotation of redemption and the heaven or cosmos.

In rock art representations and other creation, the number of circles in a labyrinth varied according to perception and belief of its creator and varied from one to as many as twelve. However, the most popular and stabilized design of the labyrinth has seven layers with one common one way path to the centre and back. At the centre of the

seven circuits labyrinth, is usually seen a cross, which extend into the mouth or (the open part) of labyrinth and intricately connected with the whole. There is an opinion that the concentric circles symbolise the hard path to god defined in the centre and its single entrance denotes birth. It is felt that it also represent a sacred path to the home of ancestors (Schuster and Carpenter 1996: 307). The seven circuits in the labyrinths possibly symbolises seven heavens, which was prevalent in ancient beliefs among Egyptians and Babylonians and also reflected in Islamic and Rabbinical literature (Rose and Maitland 1842 125; Kaltner 2011: 51). Some scholars also believe that concept of the seven heavens came from Iran and China (Stein 1987:185; Eliade 1951:248).

In the early representations of labyrinths found in rock art, at times in place of the cross a cord used be noticed running into the hub of the concentric rings and ending in a dot or a cupule in negative or positive orientation. This dot marking symbolises 'to reach the goal', 'a power addressed' i.e., a being that is a source of action, accomplishment, actualisation (Ananti 1993, C.f. Harrod 2007 325). The spiritual goal of every religion and individual practitioners is to attain liberation and attain a place in heaven. The labyrinth motif seems to envisage this concept of salvation/redemption and ascent to heaven (Petz 2008). In a sense the syntax of the labyrinth seems to convey human embracing the totality of the cosmos or the 'fixation' or 'stabilization' of the soul in the space of the divine located in the cosmos (Rene 2004 385-386).

Among the Hopi community of Arizona in USA, they believe that the circular labyrinth with the cross in the centre is a symbol of the Sun father the giver of life (www.gothicimage.co.uk). In India too, similar beliefs exist. As a continuity of hoary tradition and belief the Tamil Brahmin community settled in the lanes near south fort, Trivandrum ritualistically create multi-circular labyrinths with powdered lime in front of their homes (Fig. 28a, b, c & d). These concentric circle labyrinths have at their centre a blotch or circle. At times the inner circle additionally has designs like Swastika (an auspicious solar symbol). The outermost circle usually has rays emitting from it in deviant styles (as observed in the labyrinth from Chik Rampur).



Figure 28. a, b, c and d: Labyrinth designs representing the Sun drawn on the road in front of the homes of Tamil Brahmins in Trivandrum

Interacting with the members of the community to solicit the meaning and significance of this design, it emerged that it represents the Sun and finds representation generally only on Sundays which is associated with the Sun god or Surya. Regarding the multiple-circles in its design the general opinion that emerged was that, since the sun is

powerful and the centre of the universe, to symbolize these features, they felt multi-circles were essential. Regarding the inner blotch or circle two views emerged, the general view is that it too represents the sun as the centre of the universe and some others stated that it represents Yama. In the Hindu pantheon Yama is the god of death and is understood to be the son of Surya or the Sun god (Rao 1914: Vol. I. part II: 309). The concentric circles around the centre seem to imply a request to the Sun to keep his son subdued within his realm as unleashing him would cause death and misery. In Chaldean belief the sun is supposed to descend into bodies with life and after its death, the sun is believed to elate it back (Cumont 103).

The placement of cross or symbolic dead within the labyrinth circle also seems to have the same connotation of placement of the soul of the dead within the realm of heaven with no scope to return to the living world. An archaeological attestation of this belief comes from burial monuments. A Roman family grave tomb at Hadrumentum in North Africa (navsousse), has a fourfold labyrinth mosaic floor with a dying Minotaur in the centre and an inscription "enclosed here he loses life" and retains the connotation with death and the labyrinth as a trap of the dead spirit or soul (Kern 2000: 169 Kerenyi Dionysos fig.35). Similarly, we observe corporal relics enclosed with tombs encircled by labyrinths created in stone dating to the megalithic period as discussed above. Many of the symbols related to religion have their origin in the cosmological range-the sky, the celestial bodies and traffic between gods between heaven and earth. They bear a sacred nature in their association with sun and cosmos (Capps 1995: 127). In Rome there was a strong belief that after death the soul ascends to the celestial or astral sphere (Cumont 1911: 92).

Concluding Observations

Labyrinth on one hand appears to represent an *imago mundi* of heaven and at the same time also is a symbolic pantheon denoting different zones of progressive elevation through which the soul has to pass through to gain access and initiation into the centre of the 'pure and sacred land' of the divine. The labyrinth on one hand denotes that the entry to centre of the multi-layered heaven is difficult, but at the same time, accessible too and tends to assure the neophyte from protection from without to achieve his goal (Eliade 1952: 51).

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