

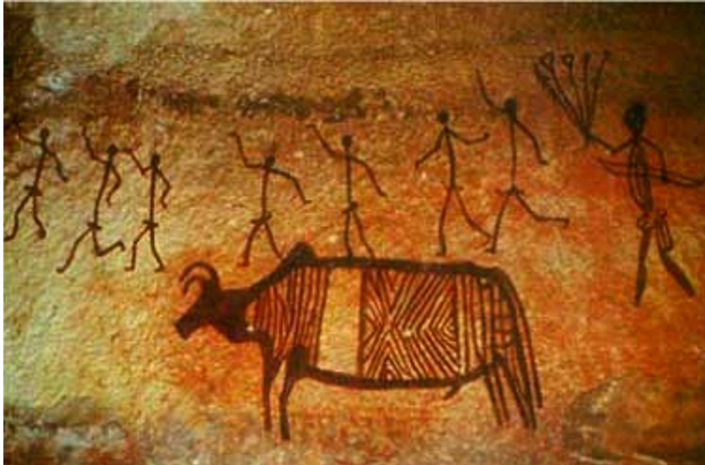
## The Concealed History of Indian Social Structure

India is a country that has an ancient cultural background which can be traced back to the pre-historic times. Art is a prominent medium that represents the evidence of that history. One of the most ancient representations of art in India was found at the *Rock Shelters of Bhimbetka*, located in the state of Madhya Pradesh. *Bhimbetka Cave Paintings* are dated to 13,000 B.C. Different paintings in these caves belong to different time periods, starting from Mesolithic to Medieval. Most paintings have been painted in orange, brown, or white colors and have managed to survive through thousands of years. “Clustered in five natural rock shelters, the paintings show large animal figures including the Indian lion and gaur (an Indian bison), beside sticklike people” (Marchant). “Painted images and symbols appear on cave walls and rock shelters throughout the world. However, researchers have had a tough time identifying how long ago various instances of rock art were created. Radiocarbon analyses of bits of paint removed from cave paintings have yielded inconsistent results” (Bower). Through this research paper, I want to find out whether the *Bhimbetka Cave Paintings* depict a system of a socio-political hierarchy of the time. To analyze the *Bhimbetka Cave paintings*, I used Erwin Panofsky’s method of Iconology and Roger Frey’s emotional elements of design.

### 1. The hunt of the beast

Analysis of the artwork using Erwin Panofsky’s method of Iconology:

Panofsky developed a method of reading a painting based on primary, secondary, and intrinsic levels which revealed the meaning of a painting through observational, conventional, and socio-cultural aspects of its time; respectively.



Primary level of meaning: This picture mainly depicts a big animal with horns and a hump. It has four legs and a long tail. Its face and the hump is filled with color and the rest of its body has a pattern of lines that have formed decorative triangles and stripes. It has a thick border around the face and the front portion, but has a thin border around its back side. The posterior legs of the animal are not filled with color and are a little hard to distinguish from its tail. In the background, there are eight human figures. All the humans have a line around their waist, suggesting a cover to protect their important body parts. The human on the right-hand side has a bow and arrows in his hand. He looks like a more prominent and detailed entity amongst the group. All the humans seem to cheer each other up.

Secondary level of meaning: The animal in the painting seems to be much larger for a single human to hunt. Hence, they must have gathered in a group. This group seems to have a leader who has the bow and arrow to kill the beast. In Indian culture, right direction represents superiority, which might be the reason for the leader to stand in the right side. The leader might have hit the beast in the back side with his arrow, which might have weakened its legs and hence, the artist depicted the legs of the animal with thin strokes. Maybe the crowd standing in the back cheered the leader after taking over the beast.

Intrinsic level of meaning: It seems that this group of people have a kind of a social system that depicts hierarchy and division of tasks. There is a clear distinction between the leader and the followers. The followers have less fancy 'clothes' on them and have no weapons. The leader is larger in size, which might have actually been a criterion on which he became a leader. Larger size also depicts the authority of that leader over the followers. The body of the beast is decorated to depict the sense of a great victory that the group achieved, which might have turned into a big feast later on. This painting looks like a portrayal of the tale of greatness of the leader, which the leader might have asked the finest of his followers to depict.

Analysis of the artwork using Roger Fry's emotional elements of design:

According to Richard Howells and Joaquim Negreiros in the chapter 'Form' in *Visual Culture*, Roger Fry believed that the "Purpose of art is not the authentic portrayal of reality, but the communication of emotion from the artist to the spectator" (43). He developed a method of reading paintings based on form using five elements of design.

Rhythm of line – The artist has used the thickness of line to represent strength. The animal being the strongest, it has been depicted using thick lines. Although, only the front of the animal has the thick lines and the lines have gotten thin in the back, which may depict the animal being attacked by the human from the back to lose its strength.

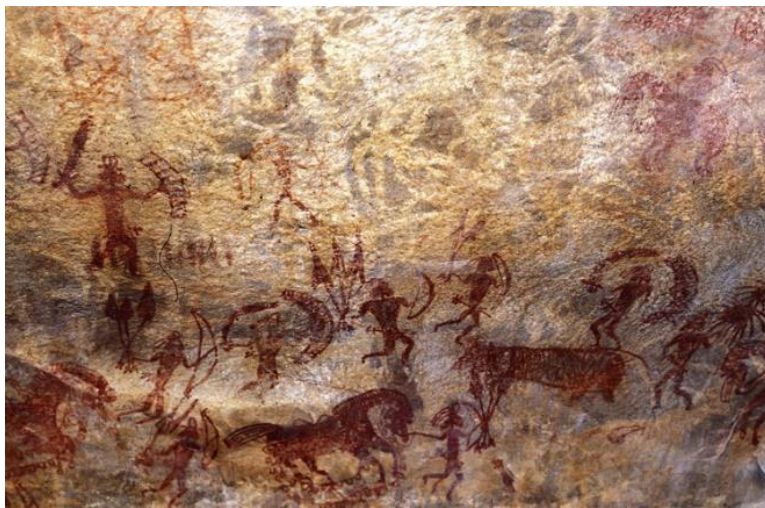
Mass – Mass has been depicted through the proximity of different lines to create pattern which would give a prominence to certain objects and create a visual hierarchy. In this painting, the most prominent figure is the animal, then the human in the right and then the rest of the humans.

Space – Since the artist has used only one color to depict all its elements, the space in the painting is helping to distinguish different components from one another and their relative distances. Space is also helping to separate the objects in the front and back.

Light and shade – The only light and shade that the painting has seems to have been caused due to the natural blend of shades on the rock.

Color – There are three main colors in the painting. The brown which is used for depicting the scenes. It is basically the color of all the objects in the foreground. The background is a blend of yellow and orange; which might or might not have been intentional.

## 2. The battle



Analysis of the artwork using Erwin Panofsky's method of Iconology:

Primary level of meaning: This painting seems to represent a battle scene. The fight is between two groups of humans. The humans are using various weapons such as bow-arrow, swords, and spears. Both opponents have animals to their aid. The group on the left side has horses whereas the group on the right has a different kind of an animal. Both the groups are

facing each other and the fight has already started. They all have similar kinds of weapons, but the group on the left side seems a bit larger and hence more powerful than the one in the right side. The postures of the figures in the scene are more realistic and they add on to the seriousness of the battlefield depicting every single warrior fighting their level best. The weapons in their possession seem more dangerous and larger than the normal bow and arrow. The forms in the background painted in cream color are giving a feel of the chaos on the battlefield.

Secondary level of meaning: The group on the left side might be a little more prosperous, as their horses have garlands around them. In the upper left hand side, the group seems to have a special entity with a crown like structure on his head and different kinds of weapons than the rest of the people. He might be the head of that clan. Hence his position is high up in the painting, indicating his position in the group. He is also facing a different direction than the rest of the fighters, which might indicate that he is not directly involved in the fight and is more of an inspiration for the other fighters to boost their spirit. The form of that figure resembles the posture of many Hindu gods.

Intrinsic level of meaning: This painting might have been painted by the member of the group that won the fight, because artist has represented the group in the left with more of a positivity along with their chief in power. Whatever triggered this battle must have violated the socio-political structure in one of the groups, which must have made both sides gather all of their resources to fight. Here, the fight is not for the survival of the fittest, but for the attainment of superiority.

Analysis of the artwork using Roger Fry's emotional elements of design:

Rhythm of line – The style of depiction is more advanced than stick figures and the depiction of the human and animal form resembles their real appearances. The flow of line is not delicate and shows the roughness of the scene.

Mass – The scene contains mass in the form of the silhouette of all the characters in the field. The background contains an intentional or unintentional use of mass through the shades of grey that seem to cast a negativity over the scene.

Space – Although the battlefield is a chaotic place, the artist has depicted space which can differentiate all the forms from one another, without losing the feel of a battle.

Shadow and light – The illusion of shadow and light can be experienced in the difference between the background and foreground of the painting.

Color – The main color used for the painting is brown. All the characters in the foreground have been painted in the same color, which is giving a feel of a silhouette to them. The yellow background has some white abstract forms woven into it which help in representing a chaos in the background of the battlefield.

### 3. The ritual



Analysis of the artwork using Erwin Panofsky's method of Iconology:

Primary level of meaning: This painting represents a ritual or a tradition which incorporates social gathering. In this painting, there are a lot of humans who seem busy in various tasks. Many of them are riding horses. The humans sitting on the horse have sword like weapons in their hands. The figure in the center seems to be an important person because its horse has a decoration around it. Apart from the horses and humans, there are a few birds and animals present around them. The person standing next to the decorated horse seems to throw something in the right direction, towards, what seems to be a fire. There are a few people who are sitting around the fire in a circle. In the lower part of the painting, there are certain human figures that have been painted in a cream color. They seem to be different entities than the rest of the group.

Secondary level of meaning: The social gathering that the group is celebrating seems like the ritual of sacrifice. What the man standing next to the horse is throwing in the fire seem to resemble the human body without head, hands, and legs. Apart from humans, they are also sacrificing birds and animals. In that context, the figures in cream color at the bottom of the painting could be a way of representing the spirits or the supernatural powers that are different, more powerful than the humans. The reason behind the humans carrying swords might be because they were about to head towards a battle, and the ritual of sacrifice could have been an anticipation of a win.

Intrinsic level of meaning: This painting of the sacrifice shows that deep down, the humans feared a superior power. They might have come up with the ritual of sacrifice to escape the wrath of that power by negotiating with it. This painting shows a disturbingly rigid hierarchy of a social system and its linkage with the spiritual beliefs. The social system has the superiors, who have been represented with the figures that have been filled with color and the inferiors who

have been represented only through lines. In relation to that, the bodies that one of the superiors is throwing are of the inferiors in the society. The root cause of the ritual is the spiritual belief associated with an existence of a super-natural power which is intangible but undeniable. The ritual is merely a way to assure safety and wellbeing of the superiors in the society through sacrificing the lives of the inferiors that don't matter to them.

Analysis of the artwork using Roger Fry's emotional elements of design:

Rhythm of line – Most characters in the painting have been painted in the form of lines. Only the most important entities have been represented by figures with filled color. Most strokes of the line are thick and confident despite the uneven surface.

Mass – Mass in the painting has been used in the form of the filled colors to emphasize the important figures. An illusion of mass has been created in some parts by generating a proximity of lines in order to depict the crowd gathered around.

Space – The artist has created a clever use of space in the painting without losing the feel of the crowd of humans and animals gathered. There is enough space generated between two sides of the painting, as if they are two distinct parts of the same story.

Shadow and light – The illusion of shadow and light is created by using different tonal values of the background colors. The dark and light tones of yellow show a turbulence that is leading the viewer's eye throughout the painting.

Color – The painting mainly contains the shades of red-orange, cream and yellow colors. The color has been used to differentiate between different entities. The orange has been used to depict all the material things. The cream color might have been used to represent something that exists but is immaterial.



Similarities and differences between the chosen paintings –

Subject of all the paintings is humans and animals. All paintings have been painted in dark colors on top of a blend of other colors in the background and depict collaboration of human beings for various purposes. They all depict one most significant person who can be called as the head of the clan. All these paintings portray various degrees of struggle for survival. In some paintings, the animals have been used as an ally, whereas, in some they have been depicted as the enemy. That context can help us put the paintings into a chronological order, where the painting in which humans were hunting animals due to their natural instincts, must have been painted before they started to use animals as pets; and the war scene between the two clans must be happening before they came up with the ritual of sacrifice to get an assurance of their win. These paintings also project the possibility of the leader of the clan hiring an artist to depict and flaunt about the tales of his glory that he can preserve inside the rock shelter, where nothing can erase it; or a mere witness of these scenes might have escaped the scene and searched for a shelter where he could express his thoughts and emotions.

Through this research, it can be concluded that the *Bhimbetka Cave Paintings* depict more than the story of a survival of an individual or a group. They depict a timeless system of socio-political hierarchy in the pre-historic periods that unfortunately still exists in India. To exemplify, the ritual of animal sacrifice resembling to the one in the painting is still taking place illegally in some tribes even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. The fear of the supernatural still exists in the minds of many social components. The elite in the society are still untouchable and unhurt despite their scams and unethical behaviors. The paintings in the cave have depicted the foundation of a culture that has an everlasting effect on the Indian civilization. This research lead me into understanding that “in the entire history of mankind visual art has characterized the

level of development of socioeconomic relations” (Jazbec). The humans being a social animal founded the basics of social system for survival and emotional expression; and to regulate that system, they created the political structure that formed the basics of not just the Indian culture, but all the cultures in the world.

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