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Rock Paintings of Tamilnadu: With Special Reference to Kozhiuthu of Palani Taluk – A Study

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Abstract

Tamil Nadu has a rich heritage and cheered history. Its ancestry dates back to the Palaeolithic age. The rock arts of Palani, displays great virtues of balance, appropriate use of colour, love of nature and a keen understanding of the life and times of the inhabitants. Scenes of battlefield, travel, hunting, festivities and others are depicted with realism and sensitivity. All the images etched on rock surfaces clearly demonstrate their urge to express themselves in forms that are intelligible. There are paintings of elephants, cattle, tiger, deer, wild boar and porcupine, and of human beings dancing or fighting. The prehistoric artists used white kaolin, lime or even ash to paint these figures. The contemporary tribal people have used enamel paint to embellish some of these paintings. They also have made beautiful paintings of elephants, peacocks and so on. The rock shelter found in Kozhiuthu (AlaKallu), the Paintings are lies southwest of Western Ghats of Palani region of Dindigul District in Tamil Nadu. The rock paintings of Kozhiuthu is belong to the Mesolithic and later periods. The Mesolithic paintings clearly depict a society of hunters and gatherers. Mainly they portray man and his relationship with animals. The subject matter of this period is quite varied, although game animals are most frequently represented. Bulls, bison, elephants, wild boars, deer, buffaloes appear. The subject matter in rock art can be very varied. The main subject everywhere is the animal or scenes of hunting them, which is the most common subject of rock paintings belonging to the Mesolithic and later periods. The subject matter of rock paintings also helps in studying many facets of human life.

Keyword: Rock paintings, Mesolithic paintings, Kozhiuthu paintings, Microliths

1. Introduction

Tamil Nadu has a rich heritage and cheered history. Its ancestry dates back to the Palaeolithic age. In the archaeological field, Tamil Nadu has the most interesting sites, considering the antiquity of monuments, richness of artefacts and the variety of its museums [1]. In epigraphy, the state can proudly boast of having the largest number of inscriptions in the country.

In the evolution of human cognitive expressions, painting is a significant milestone. The Paintings are made up of lines and colours. Humans used lines that enfold the space to fashion both abstract and real forms. What began as drawing lines to represent abstract forms several millenniums ago slowly evolved into depiction of real forms. The cornerstone of Indian paintings are strong lines and bold colours used to capture the volume and mass of the figures that are mostly imaginary and conventionalized.

In ancient Tamil Nadu being no exception, artists painted on cloth, leather, ceramics, and several other mediums. However, it is the murals and the ceramic art that survived the vicissitudes of time. This volume traces the history and development of painting in Tamil Nadu, from its beginnings in the form of rock art to modern schools. However, it was widely believed that the state had no rock art of any significance. But, this was still a few decades ago.

Till date, more than thirty sites along the Western and Eastern Ghats have been identified many of them by officers of the State and Central Departments of archaeology. This has conclusively proved the existence of cavemen who inhabited the rocky shelters of Tamil Nadu in megalithic period (Iron

Age) [2]. It has also established the State's claim to be considered as one of the important regions for studying. There are more than fifty seven rock arts are found in Tamil Nadu and it displays great virtues of balance, appropriate use of colour, love of nature, and a keen understanding of the life and time of the inhabitants.

2. Rock Paintings of Palani Region

The rock arts of Palani, displays great virtues of balance, appropriate use of colour, love of nature and a keen understanding of the life and times of the inhabitants. Scenes of battlefield, travel, hunting, festivities and others are depicted with realism and sensitivity. All the images etched on rock surfaces clearly demonstrate their urge to express themselves in forms that are intelligible. There are paintings of elephants, cattle, tiger, deer, wild boar and porcupine, and of human beings dancing or fighting. The prehistoric artists used white kaolin, lime or even ash to paint these figures. The contemporary tribal people have used enamel paint to embellish some of these paintings. They also have made beautiful paintings of elephants, peacocks and so on.

The vast majority of recognizable representations are indeed of various species of animals and human activities. Among the animals most commonly represented are the bison, the bull and the horse. Most of the representations of humans are crude and clumsy in comparison with the many animal representations. The animals, humans or signs are shown either in isolation or on panels. , which also contain several other animals, humans or signs.

Another characteristic of the Palani panels with more than one representation on them is the frequent occurrence of super positioning. It is not at all uncommon to find one animal or sign placed on top of another or sign placed on top of another or sign either overlapping the previous representation in part only or completely covering it. Animals are almost invariably shown in profile and the varieties of stances to be found in this art are numerous. Also some images are painted with solid colours in red and white pigment treatments believed to belong to an earlier period.

3. Rock Paintings of Kozhiuthu

Rock art is commonly accepted as the generic term to qualify the paintings and engravings on rocks made by humans since coming into existence. It is divided into two different categories such as, parietal art and mobile art. It is depending on the nature of its lithic base material. Scientists have kept using the term art despite the modern connotation of this word [3].

The rock art is an anachronism in the sense that art for art's sake is a nineteenth century conception [4]. Transposing that same motivation into previous epochs ignores the possibility of meaning, changing over time and cultural context. The analysis of changing meanings, however, represents a crucial feature of the work of historians and archaeologists. We can talk about historical and archaeological realities only, once these are placed into a proper context [5].

The rock shelter found in Kozhiuthu (Alakallu), the Paintings are lies southwest of Western Ghats of Palani region of Dindigul District in Tamil Nadu. The rock paintings are found in the pudukkottai village, on the way to Palani to Oddanchatram, near Chattrapatti village. A massive rock surface, curving inwards, confronted us. It looked like an arched dome (Alakallu). The entire natural cavern was painted with rock art.

A spectacular feature of the site is that the rock surface is an admixture of ancient rock art and contemporary tribal paintings, showing a continuity of tradition. The painted surface is about 11 metre long and 4.5 metre wide. The images like man, animals include Sun, Moon, nature and geometric figures. A remarkable feature of the Kozhiuthu rock art is that while the original artist made the painting in black and red ochre, the succeeding artist used white ochre to work on the same painting. The second artist mistook an animal and redrew it into another animal.

The rock paintings of Kozhiuthu is belong to the Mesolithic and later periods. The Mesolithic paintings clearly depict a society of hunters and gatherers. Mainly they portray man and his relationship with animals. The subject matter of this period is quite varied, although game animals are most frequently represented. Bulls, bison, elephants, wild boars, deer, buffaloes appear.

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historic artists used white kaolin, lime or even ash to paint these figures. The contemporary tribal people have used enamel paint to embellish some of these paintings [6].

4. Categories of Paintings

The paintings of Kozhiuthu are analysed under the six main categories:

1. Human Forms
2. Animal Forms
3. Natural Scenes
4. Material Culture
5. Symbols and
6. Religious Rituals.

5. Techniques Used in the Creation Rock Paintings

Four techniques have been used in the creation of Kozhiuthu rock paintings. These are

1. Wet transparent colour (water colour painting)
2. Wet opaque colour (Oil or tempera)
3. Crayon (dry colour painting) and
4. Stencil (Spray colour painting).

The transparent and opaque colour techniques are more common in rock paintings than the stencil technique, which is generally restricted to the execution of negative handprints. The techniques of paintings are not so complicated. Every artist should have either used wet colour or dry colours paste but drawings by means other than colour are also recorded on rock surfaces. These include engraving, carvings and brushings. Except for the stencil techniques, other techniques have been commonly used in the execution of paintings at Kozhiuthu. The hunters are portrayed using spears, axes, sticks and bows and arrows. It seems that dances were important for ceremonial or entertainment purposes during this period. It represents an element of the creative spirit of the early people.

6. Theme and Style of Rock Paintings

The subject matter in rock art can be very varied. The main subject everywhere is the animal or scenes of hunting them, which is the most common subject of rock paintings belonging to the Mesolithic and later periods. The subject matter of rock paintings also helps in studying many facets of human life.

The depictions of the species of animals, human and the food gatherers tell us much about the ecosystem in which they lived. The depiction of weapons, tools and other implements reveal their technical abilities. The illustration of his myths and beliefs bring back to our consciousness the essential aspects of our intellectual roots and displays the existential relationship between man, nature and the supernatural.

The subject matter of the rock painting of Kozhiuthu has been divided into the following categories such as, human forms and animal and bird forms. Human beings are painted lesser realistically than the animals. There are men, women, hunter, fighter, rider, attendant, dancer, man with animal hide, women with sickle, ritual performer, leader, man in hut, anthropomorphic, women engaged in domestic chores and fragmented figures. Normally animal forms are found in a part of hunting scene. A good number of the large or medium size animal's figures have been painted naturalistically. The common most details are their horns, snout and ears. The animal drawings of early period are very natural and more realistic than those belonging to the later period. In the earliest period the animals were depicted in considerable size, beautifully decorated with abstract and geometric patterns [7]. These species comprise elephant, wild buffalos, oxen, cow, deer, wild boar, dog and horse. Probably birds did not form major part of food but only an object of entertainment and curiosity in their surroundings and thus did not receive much significance in the lives of pre-historic men. The bird like a peacock is found in the shelters.

Pre-historic artists have drawn all aspects of their life independently and complete in it. The artists depicted various compositions on the rock surface. Such compositions usually comprise scenes of hunting, food gathering, fighting, dancing, and music, social and daily chores.

The rock art suggestive of mythological origin is that of worship and symbols of mother Goddess. Only a few Indian rock art paintings have a religious significance in the Kozhiuthu paintings. The

paintings of Kozhiuthu, which are likely to be related to mythology, have been grouped as follows: Sun worship, Moon worship and God Worship and Symbol worship.

The word style denotes the experimental condition of the art forms. It represents the comprehensive and mature stage of the compromise. The conflicting claims in painting of symbolism and representation are very much like the conflicting claims in life of body and soul. And just as the finest forms of life are neither the extreme of hedonism on the one hand nor of asceticism on the other. Both symbolism and representation are easy enough to be described in words. It is a phenomenon that can be readily grasped by the mind. The main qualities of rock paintings which have attracted scholars and artists are the representation of figures including styles, pose and posture, composition, action, movement and different size of forms. All the animal and human forms and abstract symbols on a well determined scheme of four styles on the assumption that in the absence of stratigraphic evidence, style alone can be the base of dating.

The style is the basic criterion to establish the chronology and decide the series, but the style alone cannot decide the chronology. In Kozhiuthu, several ways of executing figures of a single period and even in a single composition. In every following composition each new figure varies from the others. Thus if all details of outline, colour filling, decoration and unpainted inner spaces on animal bodies were to be taken into account, the number of styles to emerge would be virtually limitless and therefore of no analytical value. The other factors also contribute in the classification for this purpose; the help of super-imposition and other aspects are necessary.

Generally there were several types of drawings. In Kozhiuthu, human and animal forms are found in the first style. The realism or naturalism has been observed only in animal drawings. The technique adopted is portraying the animals in a freehand wash, no outline was drawn but the figure was completed with wash only. But in many cases, first the outline was completed and then the body was filled, either by a wash of light red or white or by different geometrical patterns [8]. In some cases drawing was completed by a thin white wash and then the details of outlines and strips were finished with brighter white line. In this case the wash outline is so perfect that it gives a naturalistic look of the animal.

The human forms associate with the representational style are simple and without any skill. The figures are either in outline or in silhouette having the formation of square. The torso of the outline figures is decorated with straight, zigzag or horizontal lines. They have been adorned with peculiar headdresses. The figures are shown equipped with stick like objects. The considerable change in the human forms is also witnessed. There are divergent views regarding the origin of human forms. In the shelter, square shape figures are found associated with stick shape figures which on their part are equipped with bows and arrows. The earliest human figures drawn in the picture are in square shape. The largest numbers of these paintings have been depicted in Kozhiuthu. These figures are either armed with wooden sticks, bow and arrow or bare handed. The arrows are always fixed with microliths. These figures represent male hunters.

There are numerous variations among square forms. Sometimes squares are filled with curvilinear liners. The hands are shown raised up, legs stretched and the head is triangular in shape. Sometime torso is decorated with linear or intricate patterns, while the limbs are shown only in stick forms. The figures are shown generally bare handed, though sticks, bows and arrows are occasionally represented.

The earlier animal figures follow the simple decoration but gradually the complicated designs in the form of intricate patterns dominate the paintings. Gradually, this style indicates advancement in the cultural complex of the painters. His perception was gradually developing and he was leading towards the consciousness of his surroundings. Since his experiences were transferred into visual art, he started portraying the narrative groupings.

The paintings found in Kozhiuthu are faded or partially obliterated and in fragmented condition. Some of them are covered with the thin layer of calcium or moss. The colours of some of the paintings have merged with those of the rock. The degree of natural preservation of these paintings varies according to the location of the shelter, exposure to sunlight, rain, wind and worst of all, the unaware or mischievous human beings [9].

The foot soldiers are armed mainly with swords. The horses are draped in reins, tassels and other ornaments. Of course it is not possible to say whether there is any mythological background to these war scenes or whether they are merely a reflex icon of warfare as the artist had seen it. The detailed depictions of weapons show that the rock shelter painters were more than casually acquainted with them.

It is possible that members of tribes were recruited into the royal armies and became acquainted with courtly dress and ornaments. In a few of the warrior scenes, the soldiers are standing on one base line that may indicate that they were war scenes taking place in the plains, and that may have been witnessed and recorded by the artist. The depictions of the bow are also varied.

In general, art is found on a rock shelter, such rock art shelters may have been used by early man as habitation sites or as a place for rest during their work in their forest. The pre-historic art gives information on pre-historic social activities, the economy, material culture, ideology and environmental context, which is often not reflected in other types of archaeological evidence. The general chronological distribution of art in the human evolutionary sequence is highly patterned; that is evidence for art, only occurs in the last 40,000 years or so [10]. The paintings give tremendous clues to understand the then era be it their life-style, entertainment or the mysticism.

The detailed concepts of animals from filled types to stick types are found in abundance which is sometime parallel to the universal movement of rock arts. One can find animal motifs of different kind which are today extinct. These are drawn in varied colour temperatures and depict various horizons of aesthetic endeavour. There are many motifs which are overlapped with other era drawings. Thus finding and accurately dating each motif or symbol is not possible. But they remain a vibrant collage of the then era. The rock art heritage of India, remains an infant as per recording and rediscovery of sites go. Yet, they project, an ample scope to invite tourists from world over to witness the then era of prehistoric kind. Sordidly enough none of the rock art sites have been incorporated into the Tourist map of India but if those sites are maintained and preserved as heritage parks then the world would be able to read the open aesthetically created dossiers of our ancestors.

7. Conclusion

The most common themes in the Kozhiuthu cave paintings are large wild animals, such as elephant, bison, horses and deer. The tracings of the human hands as well as abstract patterns called finger flutings. The species found most often were suitable for hunting by humans, but were not necessarily the actual typical prey found in associated deposits of bones; for example, the painters of Lascaux have mainly left reindeer bones, but this species does not appear at all in the cave paintings, where equine species are the most common. Drawings of humans were rare and are usually schematic as opposed to the more detailed and naturalistic images of animal subjects. One explanation for this may be that realistically painting the human form was forbidden by a powerful religious taboo [11].

Pigments used in the Kozhiuthu rock paintings are black, red and white. The ingredients are such as, yellow ochre, hematite, manganese oxide and charcoal. The outlines of the drawings were incised in the rock first, and in some areas are only engraved.

The descendants of the original hunters and gatherers and artists of this region are simply called Palani region tribes, who still uphold some of the traditions of their ancestors. In the rock paintings, their ancestors are depicted dancing in pairs or in a row and playing. They hunted animals and collected honey from hives of wild bees. Their mode of dress was quite simple. The women used to carry food and water and looked after the children. The forebears of the present day tribal people had a variety of ways to express the magic of their beliefs, rituals and taboos. The tribes living in these hills make memorials made of wood. The subject of the carvings are totally unrelated to the life of the deceased but the style and subject like horse rider, sun, moon, tree and hut is similar to the late period paintings depicted by their predecessors in the past on the mural of the rock shelter.¹⁰ They also decorate the walls of their wattle hut and this activity seems to have its roots in the cave dwelling traditions of their ancestors. Man and horses of geometric construction are randomly spaced across the walls; such paintings are done during the rainy season or on festive occasions bearing close resemblance to those found in the painted shelters.

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