

MODE OF COMMUNICATION THROUGH THE SYMBOLS AND ROCK ARTS DURING THE EARLY INDIA

Sourav Sen

“Society cannot exist without communication; communication cannot occur outside a social system” (Harold Mendelsohn).¹

Communication is at the heart of all social intercourse. In the preface of the book “*Many Voices One World: Communication and Society Today and Tomorrow*”, Sean MacBride said, “I would paraphrase H. G. Wells and say human history becomes more and more a race between communication and catastrophe. Full use of communication in all its varied strands is vital to assure that humanity has more than a history . . . that our children are ensured a future”.²

Communication is a method of sending and receiving information between two or more persons. This information is related to facts, ideas, concepts, opinions, beliefs, attitudes, instructions and also emotions. When people had no idea about any language and script in the beginning of the prehistoric period, people used to communicate each other by gesturing. After that, they used pictograms and rock-arts and then they used ideographs. Later, people used the languages and scripts for communication. So, these artworks and symbols have not only the aesthetic value but also used as the medium of communication by people at early age.

During the early period, people used to paint on the rock surface. This art work is known as ‘Rock art’ or ‘Rock painting’. The rock arts are the expression of human experience. “Man began his writing with picture-writing, just as the child likes to begin, but the first attempts to express ideas graphically or rather pictorially, were undifferentiated; they could belong to the history of art or to the history of magic or to the history of writing”.³ The primitive man first draw or paint the schematic figures of animals, stick-like figures of humans, geometric patterns, crude picture of objects, etc. but all of those paintings were related with the customs and human life in the society. These pictures actually played the role of a medium of communication in early period.

The ideas of writing and drawing were identical in prehistoric Egypt and in early Greece, as it is shown by the Egyptian word ‘*s-sh*’ and by the Greek ‘*graphein*’, which mean both writing and drawing. The word ‘*graphein*’ gave us the main component of many words connected with writing, such as pictography, calligraphy,⁴ stenography,⁵ iconography,⁶ and so forth.⁷ Before the rock arts ‘*petroglyphs*’⁸ were another art work of primitive people. Petro glyphs were first reported in the subcontinent by Henwood in 1856. At the Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh in India, the petro glyphs found in a form of geometrical designs. A petro glyphs from Raisen proves that on the ceiling of the rock-shelter there is a painting in which a plough dragged by a pair of bullocks followed by a man is clear indication of agricultural activity.⁹ David Diringer lay emphasized in his book ‘*The Alphabet : A Key to the History of*

Mankind that these petro glyphs are actually symbols. In India and beyond this territory, some other ancient civilizations used these symbolic characters for means of communication. By the using of symbols primitive persons were trying to express their thoughts, describing the situations, etc. For instance, some sorts of codes of tokens for sending message are found among various primitive peoples, e.g., symbolic epistles *aroko*, “to convey news”, of the Jebu or Yebu and other tribes in Nigeria, Western Africa, etc.¹⁰

Symbols have three characteristics which have deep significance for their use in communication; i) They are produced by human agents – there is no convincing evidence that subhuman animals produce and utilize symbols; ii) they have communicative significance only in so far as the communicators and communicates have previously agreed on their meanings; iii) they are produced with intent to structure situations in which the parties have or are assumed to have a common interest.¹¹ In modern days these symbols are used as the medium of communication also in the ambulance, hotel and restaurant, for showing road direction, etc. Now-a-days these are popularly known as pictograph or picture-writing. “Picture-writings are found everywhere. These are the work of ancient peoples (the prehistoric inhabitants of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, Crete, Spain, southern France, and many other countries) in their primitive stage of culture, or of modern tribes (of Central Africa, North America and Australia). The bark of trees, tables of wood, the skins of animals, bones or ivory, and the surfaces of rocks, were all, and are still, used for this purpose”.¹² Moreover, the highly developed picture-writing is being a pictorial representation of ideas to be conveyed from one person to another. Like an e.g., a circle might be a sun but it represent not only the sun, but also heat or light or a god associated with the sun, or the word ‘day’. So, those pictures actually borrowed the ideas from one person to another **Plate 27.1**.







Ancient Sumerian	Ancient Egyptian	Chinese
 Eye	 See (verb)	 Eye
 Forest	 Water	 Water
 Mountains	 Cities	 Mountain
 Torch	 Fire	 Fire
 Person	 Men	 Person
	 Women	 Woman

Plate 27.1: Image of different types of Ideographic-writing in various countries, (Source-<http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com>).

Therefore, some scholars considered it as an ideographic writing and some of the scholars argued that these are stylized writing. But in short, these are actually symbols. In ancient society these symbols occupied an important position and very much influenced in the life style of the people. So, both of the aesthetic and social values were carried by the symbols.

The *Satapatha Brahmana* says, "The reproduced image is the art".¹³ Visual art is an expression of human experience. Rock art is a very well-known and rich visual art in ancient India. The archaic Indian rock-paintings are symbolic representations of the primitive way of life (**Plates 27.2-27.3**).¹⁴ It is very difficult to say that when the rock art tradition was started in the early India. The first rock art ascribed to the lower Paleolithic were eleven petroglyphs in Auditorium cave, Bhimbetka complex, Madhya Pradesh, India.¹⁵ In India, Bhimbetka is one of the most significant rock art site. On the basis of style, technique and superimposition at Bhimbetka, V. S. Wakankar has divided these paintings into seven periods. Period I, Upper Palaeolithic; Period II, Mesolithic; Period III, Chalcolithic. After period III (c. 2500 BP) there are four successive historical periods.¹⁶

Almost in every parts of India we can find out the creativity of primitive people. From Ladakh and Zaskar valleys in north to southern parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu; and from Gujarat in the west to Assam and Manipur in the east distributed a vast area for the rock arts. The largest concentration is confined to the Vindhyan ranges of Madhya Pradesh, and its Kaimur extension into Uttar Pradesh. Equally important paintings and engravings were reported from southern Deccan in the granite wilderness of the Krishna-Tungabhadra Doab.¹⁷ With collaboration of Archaeological Survey of India A. C. L. Carleyle discovered the first rock art in India in 1867-68 on the walls and ceilings of rock-shelters near Sohagi Ghat in district Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh (**Map 27.1**).

The colors used by the prehistoric rock painters were extracted from the minerals. The great mass of rock paintings show towards several shades of red ranging from rather dark violet to yellowish brick-red. The red colours, in most cases, were acquired from red haematite, called '*geru*' containing iron oxide found in lateritic formations. For this reason the local people called it '*Rakt – ki – putariya*'.¹⁸ White is the second most common colour in terms of frequency of usage. The colour was obtained either from calcium carbonate (*kankar*) or from kaolin clayey deposits. Apart from that some of the early paintings were painted in green, yellow and orange also. So, primarily these are made from various herbs or plants and minerals (i.e., limestone, etc.). In modern days these natural colors are used by the *Patuas*¹⁹ in their paintings. The *pat* is also used as a medium of communication in modern days. Various types of colours are actually reflecting the different situations of the people. Because each colour was used in different situations. For instance, red color used only for depicting the hunting scenes, but green used for the social gathering and entertainments, whereas white used for depicting the daily life scenes.



Map 27.1: Locations of Rock art in India, (Courtesy – Erwin Neumayer, ‘Prehistoric Indian Rock Paintings’, Delhi, 1983).

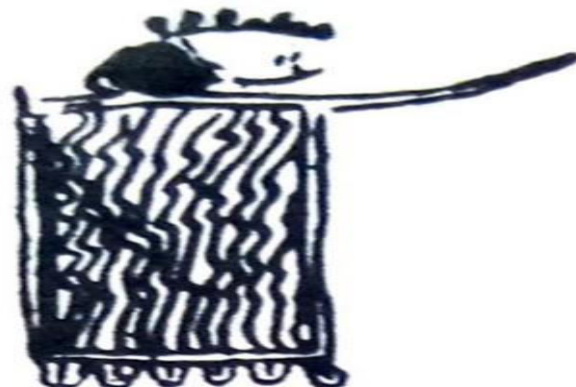


Plate 27.2: Rock art of square-shaped body with wavy lines on his bust, (Courtesy - Vasudev S. Agrawala, *Indian Art: A history of Indian Art from the earliest times up to the third century A.D.*, Varanasi, 1965).

According to the style and themes of the rock arts in India, V. S. Agrawala²⁰ categorized the sequences of rock art in four series.

- 1st Series: Schematic figures only, divided into early and late. In this series the human and animal figures are drawn by red and white or cream color. First they showed square-shaped body with triangular heads, the bust being filled by zig-zag or wavy lines, probably it seems like the garments are made by tree barks.

The later stage of the first series shows stick like figures with triangular head. These figures also appear with triangular and square body but with a single wavy line within the bust.

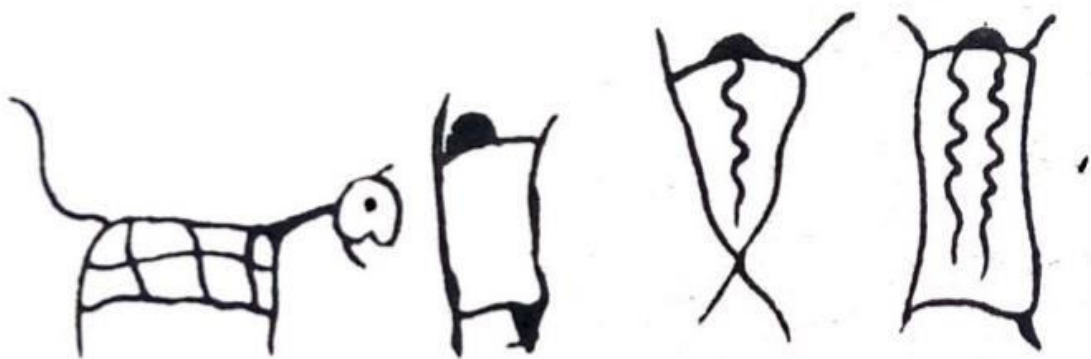


Plate 27.3: Rock art of square-shaped bodies and triangular heads with single wavy lines on the bust, (Courtesy - Vasudev S. Agrawala, *Indian Art: A history of Indian Art from the earliest times up to the third century A.D.*, Varanasi, 1965).



Plate 27.4: Rock art of hunting scene, (Courtesy – V. H. Sonawane, *Rock Art of India: A Historical Perspective*, *Man and Environment*, Vol. XXXIII (I), 2008).

- 2nd Series : In this series paintings are crude but naturalistic. The figures have elongated necks, wavy hair, sinuous legs and fringed skirts. In this series the paintings identified mainly the hunting scenes. The painters used to draw bow and arrow. It is clear that in those times people engaged in hunting-gathering system **Plates 27.4-27.7**. Therefore, the economic system was not so developed during the early period.
- 3rd and 4th Series : The cultural scene changes from primitive hunting to well-armed warriors and mounted horsemen in battle scenes where archers swordsmen are engaged in wild action. Armed cattle riders have also seen in those art works. Besides these pictures there were also seen a group of women or men and women dancing in a pair, a man playing on a harp, men playing drums and double pipes, etc.

Rock art of the historic period is characterized by the presence of writings in Brahmi, Kharoshti, Sankha and even Nagari scripts, besides the introduction of religious icons and symbols of various prevailing faiths.²¹ There are two distinct arguments among the two groups of scholars about the rock arts of India. One group of scholars used to say that, the rock arts are primitives, having not any aesthetic beauty because all the figures are stick-like figures; there is no proportion, etc. Whereas the other group of scholars lay emphasize on the aesthetic beauty and creativity of the rock arts. Aesthetics beauty involves in three factors, i.e., feelings, creation and communication potential from the point view of an art creator and the concept of creativity based on spontaneous, rhythm, originality, harmony and so on and all of these features can be seen on the prehistoric rock art in India.²² Creation is the linking line between creator and viewer and subsequently the mood, feeling, concept, etc. of both ends. If a viewer can reach the concept and the feeling of the artist, communication is established between transmitting and receiving points. The intensity of communication may vary from person to person, depending on receptivity. That is why the accuracy or vagueness of the communication may vary from person to person depending on his perception.²³

The symbols and rock arts were used as vehicles through which the unknown could be given visible forms of knowing meaning. The prehistoric men in India through the rock arts and symbols they can communicate each other on these following ideas; these are – 1. Hunting-gathering system in society; 2. Domestication of animals and their economic structure; 3. Family life; 4. Rituals and entertainments. So, it is mainly associated with the society.

The paintings represent the social character of a race. Because paintings can be an expression of the most profound individuality, it is a real, concrete individuality. It is also conceived the situation of the margin of the community. It cannot be denied.²⁴ That the art itself a social phenomenon. First, because of the artist, his unique primary experience might be, is a social being. Second, because of his work, however deeply marked by his social experience, unique and unrepeatable its objectification or form might be, is always a bridge, a connecting link between the artist and other members of the society. Third, because a work of art affects other people – it contributes to the reaffirmation or devaluation of their ideas, goals, and values – and is a social force which, with its emotional or ideological values, shakes people. The artistic

activity is an essential human activity. It is important to the artist who realizes in his creation, the power of his being at the same time that he establishes, by objectifying the richness of humanity, a new and original means of communication between himself and others.²⁵

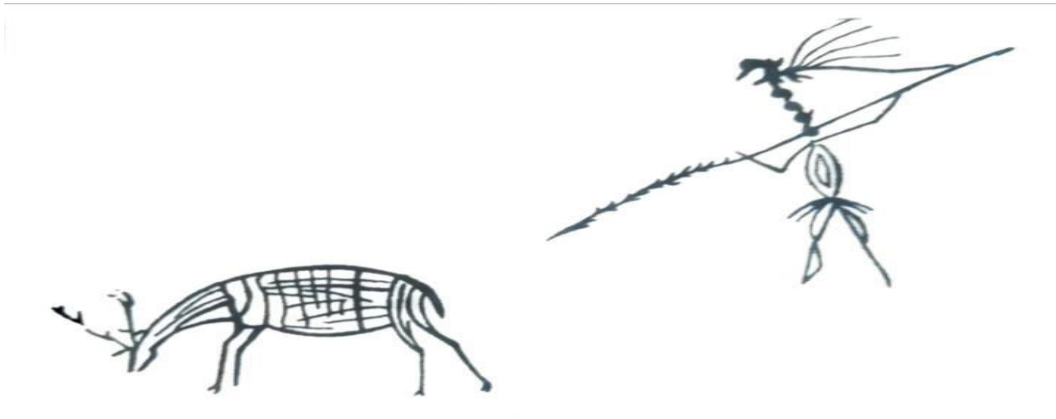


Plate 27.5: A hunter was trying to aim a deer with a long spear, (Courtesy - Bansi Lal Malla and V. H. Sonawane (eds.), *Global Rock Art*, New Delhi, 2013).

The Bhimbetka caves are popularly known for depiction of hunting – gathering scenes of the pre-historic time in India. From these hunting scenes people can understand about the dress, which have to wear at the hunting time. The artist gave the idea to the people about the dress through the rock art. The art of hunting scenes depicted tools and weapons for different purpose at the hunting time. Mostly they used bow and arrow and long spear, sticks, slings, etc. Apart from that the hunters used traps, masks, ornaments during hunting time.

The rock art is kind of non-verbal communication between the artist and the viewer. From the cave paintings people can communicate to the others about their food habitation. They ate mainly the meat of bison, deer, antelope, rhinoceros, etc. The smaller animals like lizards and mongoose are also used as their food.



Plate 27.6: A group of hunters wearing masks and headdress hunting two chitals (spotted deer) and a rhinoceros with various weapons, (Courtesy – Bansi Lal Malla and V. H. Sonawane (eds.), *Global Rock Art*, New Delhi, 2013).

They also tried to communicate to the other people about their leisure time interests such as, fishing, honey collecting, fruit collecting, dance specially the group dance, etc. through the cave paintings **Plates 27.8-27.9**.



Plate 27.7: A hunter attacking a deer with bow and arrow, (Courtesy – Bansi Lal Malla and V. H. Sonawane (eds.), *Global Rock Art*, New Delhi, 2013).



Plate 27.8: Honey gatherers collecting honey from honeycombs, [Courtesy – Bansi Lal Malla and V. H. Sonawane (eds.), *Global Rock Art*, New Delhi, 2013].

There are ample sources of information of musical instruments, music and dance form through the rock art. These are also considered as the non-verbal medium of expression in early India. They depicted the scene of uniform group dance **Plates 27.10-27.12**. It is also the sign of primitive communism in the society as well as the highly developed rhythmic environment. People also used some musical instruments for communication purpose. Such as, string instruments, wind instruments and drums which are depicted on the rock art by the artists.²⁶

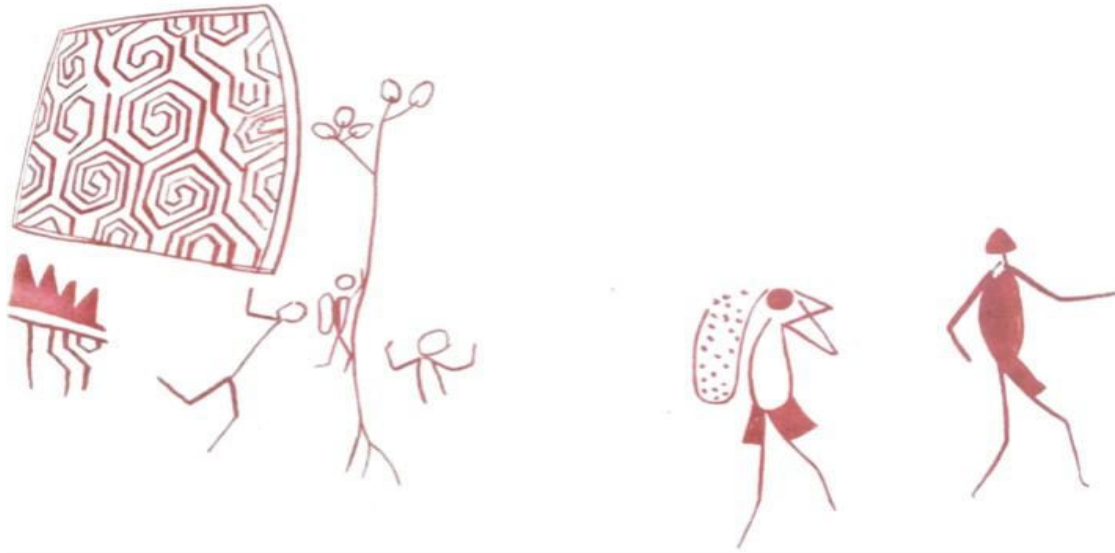


Plate 27.9: A person climbing on the tree and collecting fruits, (Courtesy – Erwin Neumayer, *Prehistoric Indian Rock Paintings*, Delhi, 1983).



Plate 27.10: Group dance from Lakhajoar, Painting in green colour, (Courtesy – Bansi Lal Malla and V. H. Sonawane (eds.), *Global Rock Art*, New Delhi, 2013).



Plate 27.11: A dancer with a ‘speech-bubble’, Lakhajoar, Upper Palaeolithic, Painting in red with green contour lines. Headgear in green. Height 40 cm., (Courtesy – Bansi Lal Malla and V. H. Sonawane (eds.), *Global Rock Art*, New Delhi, 2013).

There are plenty number of examples of tree worshipping through the rock art. It is also a kind of non-verbal communication with the people about their religious beliefs. Specific mention may be made of the figure of *Vanadeva* found at Adamgarh and of the fertility symbol at Abchand in Sagar district, Madhya Pradesh.²⁷ Apart from the trees the artist used also some other symbols for expressing their religious beliefs. The primitive people were afraid of natural calamity. That is why they depicted the scenes and symbols of the natural powers, like rain, water, thunder, fire, moon, stars, etc. in their paintings. In Indian mythology *chakra* and *trishula* represents progress and prowess and these symbols also occurs in several of the rock-shelters.²⁸

Apart from India, Australia and South Africa are two most important sites for rock art. The perspective of Indian rock art is vast, both in thematic and stylistic contents. It is forming as an important cultural heritage of humanity. Its antiquity range starts from the Paleolithic period up to the Historical times. It continues as visual documents of our ancestors, which are fascinating as well as challenging in terms of their interpretations. The present endeavor not only reveals the antiquity and distribution of rock art in India but also enriches our understanding the lifestyle of

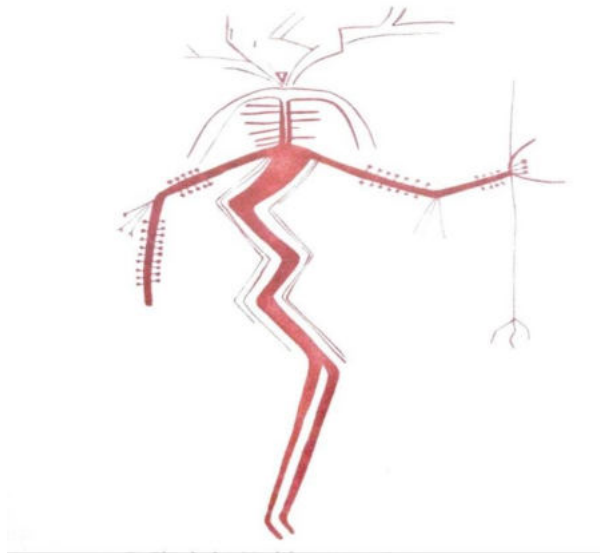


Plate 27.12: The masked dancer holds a trident-like staff in his left hand. Wakankar named this figure 'Nataraja', (Courtesy – Erwin Neumayer, *Prehistoric Indian Rock Paintings*, Delhi, 1983).

the early human society. An interesting thing is that these primitive rock art objects are used in contemporary society under many transformations. So, the tradition of symbols and art forms continues in the society through using sign boards on the roads, ambulance, for denoting male or female rooms, etc. and these are also used as the mode of communication with the people. Therefore, symbols and rock art played a vital role in the non-verbal communication among the people from the earliest times to the present days.

Notes and References:

1. Cited by Lewis A. Dexter and David M. White (eds.), *People, Society and Mass Communications*, New York, 1964, p. 30.
2. Sean MacBride, *Many Voices One World: Communication and Society Today and Tomorrow*, UNESCO, 1982, p. xvii.
3. David Diringer, *The Alphabet: A Key to the History of Mankind*, Great Britain, 1949, (2nd Edition, revised), p. 21.
4. The art of producing decorative handwriting or lettering with a pen or brush.
5. The art of writing in shorthand especially written from oral discourse.
6. The term '*Iconography*' derives from the Greek word *eikon*, means 'image'. This is the most primitive stage of representing thought. According to the French scholar Maurice Dunand, it suggests a static impression, and not definite ideas following each other. Iconography is basically used for the arrangement of pictures representing familiar subjects.
7. David Diringer, *op.cit.*, p. 25.
8. '*Petroglyphs*' were painted with peroxide or iron, with dots and lines and of the various geometric, asymmetric signs or conventionalized figures of men, painted or engraved on stones.
9. S. K. Pandey and Pradeep Shukla, '*Petroglyphs from Raisen and Adjoining Areas in Madhya Pradesh*' in Bansi Lal Malla and V. H. Sonawane (eds.), *Global Rock Art*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 2013, p. 50.
10. David Diringer, *op.cit.*, p. 29.
11. Lewis A. Dexter and David M. White (eds.), *op.cit.*, p. 60.
12. David Diringer, *op.cit.*, p. 33.
13. *Satapatha Brahmana*, 3.2.1.5, c. 800 B.C. cited by Yashodhar Mathpal, *Prehistoric Rock Paintings of Bhimbetka Central India*, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1984, p. 6.
14. S. K. Pandey, *Indian Rock Art*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 1993, p. 221.
15. R. G. Bednarik, Paleolithic art in India, *Man and Environment* 18(2), 1993, pp. 33-40; R. G. Bednarik, *Indian Pleistocene Rock Art in a Global Context* (see webpage – <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311707006>), January 2012, pp. 1-8.
16. D. P. Agarwal, *The Archaeology of India*, New Delhi, 1984, p. 83.
17. V. H. Sonawane, Rock Art of India: A Historical Perspective, *Man and Environment* XXXIII (I), 2008, pp. 1-13.
18. Vasudeva S. Agrawala, *Indian Art: A history of Indian Art from the Earliest Times up to the Third Century A.D.*, Varanasi, 1965, p. 10.
19. *Patua* or *patidar* are common Bengali words widely-understood to mean both a professional artist and his whole caste. The *Patua*, a professional artist by caste rather than a craftsman, earns his living by making images. Both *patua* and *patidar* are derived from the word '*pat*', the former ending with the Bengali suffix '*ua*', and the latter with the Persian suffix '*dar*', meaning holder. Most of the Sanskrit dictionaries include the word '*patta*' to mean cloth or kind of fabric, silk

cloth, etc. In many Bengali villages there are *Patua-paras* which are existed till now and the artist through their *pat-chitra* (painting) and *pat-gan* (song) used to communicate with the other person in the society (see, *Patuas and Patua Art in Bengal* by David J. McCutcheon and Suhrid K. Bhowmik, Firma KLM (P) Ltd., Calcutta, 1999).

20. Vasudeva S. Agrawala, *op.cit.*, pp. 10-11.
21. V. H. Sonawane, *op.cit.*, p.10.
22. Indu Dhar Dwivedi, 'Creativity, Communicability and Aesthetic Appreciation of Pre- and Proto-Historic Central Indian Rock Paintings', in Bansi Lal Malla and V. H. Sonawane (eds.), *op.cit.*, p. 299.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 300.
24. Adolfo Sanchez Vasquez (translated by Maro Riofrancos), *Art and Society: Essay in Marxist Aesthetics*, Monthly Review Press, New York, USA, 1973, p. 112.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
26. Erwin Neumayer, 'Music and Musical Instruments in Indian Rock Art', in Bansi Lal Malla and V. H. Sonawane (eds.), *op.cit.*, p. 398.
27. S. K. Pandey, *op.cit.*, p. 226.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 227.