



STUDY OF FEMALE FIGURES IN INDIAN ROCK ART WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RAISEN DISTRICT, MADHYA PRADESH, INDIA: IDENTITY, STYLISTIC AND CHRONOLOGICAL ASPECTS

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Abstract: Large number of rock paintings found in the natural rock shelters, caves and caverns across many parts of India throws light on the life-ways of prehistoric people, provides information on their thoughts and beliefs, society, religion and rituals, material culture, technology, economy and also about the fauna and flora that was exploited and revered in the past. But the female figures found in the Indian rock art sites have not received their due attention and were not studied properly in order to identify the role they have played since prehistoric times to the historic periods. Study of different types of female figures found at various rock art sites in Africa and Europe suggest different meanings and purposes. This paper examines the different types of female figures found in the rock art sites of India with special reference to the Raisen District of Madhya Pradesh to understand their role in the day-to-day life of various indigenous communities from the remote past. It also attempts to understand their identity in the society as well as to establish a relative chronological sequence of such representations on the basis of the study of stylistic features including theme and subject matter and superimpositions.

Keywords: Rock paintings, Raisen District, female figures, identity, style, chronology.

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Introduction

In India, prehistoric paintings were discovered as early as 1867, but knowledge about their precise antiquity and origin are not yet known (Mathpal: 1984 & 1992, Saleem: 2017: 59-82). Since then, due to the efforts of scholars like V.S.

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Anderson, N.P. Chakravarty, S. Chakravarty, J. Cockburn, F. Fawcett, R. K. Pancholi, M.L. Meena, Narayan Vyas, M. Ghosh, C.A. Silberrand, R.P. Kathuria, Riza Abbas, Vincent A Smith, Gurukkal, Gurumurthy, Kumaravelu, Meenakshi Pathak-Dubey, A.K. Prasad, Sairaman, Kantikumar Pawar, Indrani Chatopadhyay, O.P. Sharma, R. Mohana, etc. useful information on various aspects of rock art found in different parts of India was brought to light and published. Rock paintings of non-iconic and iconic phases or categories, drawn in different styles with various themes and subject matter, were found in the form of superimpositions, in different colours and covered with patina. This suggests that these caves and rock shelters where the figures are found were occupied by Late Pleistocene hominids for a long time and the antiquity of such paintings goes back to at least 40,000 years Before Present. On the basis of the study of style, superimpositions, theme, subject matter, patina, colour and context of the rock paintings, one can suggest a relative chronological sequence for Indian rock art until the paintings and other art forms can be dated directly. Various scholars working on Indian rock art have their own views regarding the term 'style' to understand as well as to interpret and to assign a relative chronological sequence to different types of rock paintings including animal and human figures as well as intricate/geometric patterns (Chandramouli:1996, Wakankar and Brooks: 1976, Tyagi:1992:303-317, Mathpal:1984, Neumayer:1983; 1993, Weissner:1990: 105-12, Saleem: 2017: 59-82 & 2019 (*in press*); 2020 (*in press*). In the study of prehistoric rock art, it is essential to observe the stylistic features, superimpositions, theme, subject matter and colour of the paintings. The earliest paintings are often in a highly fragmented state and are covered with a thick layer of patina. In such conditions it is very difficult to study the subject matter in the rock paintings. Dating rock paintings is the most challenging part of the study of rock art research in India (as well as in other regions), but it is the most crucial aspect as well. Some

of the rock paintings were assigned to the later Palaeolithic period and a few have been assigned to Historic and late Historic periods. According to R.G. Bednarik efforts have been made to directly date rock art, but estimating the precise ages of individual paintings remain as one of the most challenging tasks in South Asian archaeology.

Human figures in 'S', stick and square shapes were found at various rock art sites located in central India. A few among them were assigned to Upper Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Early Agriculturists and Cattle Keepers and Historic and late Historic periods on the basis of rock art attributes or parameters (Wakankar: 1984: 1992). But the depictions of female figures found at a number of rock art sites in India have not received the due attention in order to understand the role that they have played from Prehistoric to Historic periods. The study of published literature on various aspects of rock art as well as the study of female figures found in Raisen District of Madhya Pradesh suggests that right from the prehistoric period women have equally taken part in the day-to-day activities such as hunting of big and small game, fishing, gathering of fruit, roots, tubers and honey collection, food collection, food processing as well as food preparation and consumption, dancing and playing games, love-making, etc. (Saleem and Chauhan: 2019 b). Such kind of depictions of female figures shown in various forms and as participating in different activities were found at Bhopal-Dharampuri, Putli Karar, Urden, Bhimbetka, Lakhajoar, Kharwai, Firengi, Jaora, Badami-Hiregudda, Kathotia, Figrengi, Bori-East, Bori-West, Karmodiya, Maser, Pachmarhi, Raisen, etc.

Female figures

Depictions of 'S' shaped, stick and square-shaped male human figures in various activities such as big and small game hunting, fishing, fruit, roots and tubers and honey collection, love-making scenes, dancing and playing games, etc. found at various rock art sites in India have been studied exclusively and they were assigned a relative

chronological sequence from Upper Palaeolithic to Historic and late Historic periods whereas other types of female figures found in association with the above mentioned male figures have not received due attention. Careful study of published literature as well as the recent work carried out in Raisen District (Saleem and Chauhan:2019b) and in the rock art sites of Pachmarhi area in Madhya Pradesh (Dubey-Pathak: 1991:20-37 & 2020) suggests that the depictions of female figures were found at a number of rock art sites. Study of female figures in Indian rock art including Raisen District is not only important to understand their role in the day-to-day life of various indigenous communities from prehistoric to historic periods, but also to recognise their identity in the society as well as to establish a chronological sequence to such kind of representations on the basis of theme, subject matter and stylistic features of such representations.

Identifying female figures in the Indian rock art sites is very difficult as the paintings of female figures were mostly depicted without showing any physical features or they were shown as quite bulky with body decorations of intricate or geometric patterns such as spiral or honey-comb, wavy lines, suggesting broad continuity of an earlier tradition (Tyagi: 1992:303-317). Recent study of intricate and geometric patterns found at various rock art sites in Raisen District of Madhya Pradesh such as Bhimbetka, Lakhajoar, Urden, Karmodiya, Pengawan, Barla, Ghatla, etc. (Saleem and Chauhan: 2019a&b, Saleem: 2020) and those found in the rock art sites of Hadoti Plateau in south-eastern Rajasthan (Saleem: 2014a&b, 2017: 59-82) suggests about the origin and purpose of intricate and geometric patterns (Saleem: 2020 *in press*) and supports Tyagi's (1992:303-317) observations about the emergence and evolution of intricate and geometric patterns. But the careful study of published literature on Indian rock art as well as the study of rock art sites in Raisen District of Madhya Pradesh and the rock art of Hadoti Plateau in south-eastern Rajasthan suggests that

the depictions of female figures was started right from the beginning of rock art and they were shown as equipped with spears and bow and arrows and sometimes associated with 'S' shaped, stick shaped or square shaped human figures and they were shown as participating in various activities. Most importantly, studying the role of women during the prehistoric and proto-historic periods is very important as they are shown to have taken part not only in the domestic activities, but also in the big and small-game hunting as well as fishing and collection of fruits, roots and tubers, and honey collection activities. Representations of female figures found at few rock art sites in India were shown with the physical features such as breasts, wearing short or long skirts, different types of ornaments, etc. or they were shown in love-making scenes. But the depictions of female figures found at rock art sites such as Bhopal-Dharampuri, Jaora, Lakhajoar, Raisen, Firengi, Kathotia, Bhimbetka, Urden, Maser, Karmodiya, Nagouri, Badami, Gupha Masir, Karmodiya, and Barounda were shown in different activities and such depictions indicate their role in the day-to-day life of various indigenous communities who lived during different cultural periods. We shall now discuss three varieties of female figures found at different rock art sites of Raisen District of Madhya Pradesh.

Female figures in association with 'S' shaped human figures

Interestingly, a few female figures in stylised 'S' shape were also found at few rock art sites in India. The absence of physical features of such figures makes it difficult to identify them as those of females. But the differences in the body decorations and objects suggest that they are female figures. Similar depictions of female figures in stylised 'S' shape painted in green and in the combination of green, yellow and red colours and in dark and dull red colour were found at Kharwai (Fig. 1.1a), and in green colour at Lakhajoar (Fig. 1.1b), Raisen (Fig. 1.1c) and Bhimbetka were shown as dancing whereas one

'S' shaped female figure found at Maser is shown as watching butchering of a deer was found at a new rock art site Maser in Raisen District (Saleem and Chauhan: 2020).

Female figures in association with stick shaped human figures

Depictions of square shaped human figures shown in association with the stick shaped human figures in hunting, dancing, love-making and playing games represent the female figures. These female figures were shown either with physical features such as breasts or their body proportion is shown as bulky and decorated with various kinds of intricate or geometric patterns or shown in love-making postures. Such kind of representations of female figures was shown as hunting animals in association with stick shaped human figures. The females shown as equipped with spears such as those found at Bhimbetka and Bhopal-Dharampuri were rarely found in the Indian rock art sites. A female figure at Bhimbetka (Figure 6) was shown in fruit collection scene and another female figure at Bhopal-Dharampuri was shown in a hunting scene and the body portion of this female figure is decorated with a vertical line in a rectangular shape (Fig. 1.2) whereas two stick shaped female figures found at Lakhajoar (Fig. 1.3a) were shown as carrying kids in a basketlike objects on their back. A few square shaped female figures at Kharwai were shown as dancing in association with stick shaped male human figures (Fig. 1.4), Bori-East and Bori-West whereas female figures shown as playing a game in association with stick shaped male human figures were found at Firengi (Fig. 1.5).

Female figures in association with other human figures

Depictions of square shaped male and female figures were also found in the rock art sites of India including those of Raisen District in Madhya Pradesh and in such representations the body portion of female figures is shown as decorated with different types of designs and in

few representations they were shown as wearing long or short skirts decorated with various designs such as those at Karmodiya (Fig. 1.3c) and Putli Karar (Fig. 1.3d). Female figures in association with square shaped human figures were found at Badami-Hiregudda (Fig. 1.8). Similar female figures were also found at Lakhajoar, Bori-West, Jaora, Kathotia, Firengi, Bhimbetka, Putli Karar, etc. Interestingly representation of a marriage scene is found at Lakhajoar (Saleem and Chauhan:2019b) in which two human figures were shown as standing face-to-face and holding their hands whereas 18 human figures on both sides were shown as dancing.

The three varieties of female figures such as those found at Bhopal-Dharampuri (Fig. 1.2), Kharwai (Fig. 1.1a), Lakhajoar (Fig. 1.1b) and Raisen (Figs. 1.1c and 1.3a) were either shown in dancing or hunting scenes. The female figures found at Bhimbetka (Fig. 1.6) were shown in fruit collection scene and two female figures at Jaora (Fig. 1.7) were shown as using a digging stick to catch rodents. Female figures found at Kathotia (Fig. 1.9) were shown in food processing activities. But the female figures found at Lakhajoar were shown as carrying children in a basket like object (Fig. 1.3a) whereas two stick shaped female figures in red colour were shown in association with two stick shaped male human figures at Urden were shown as wearing short skirts including a headgear and were shown as dancing (Fig. 1.3b). Similar stick shaped female figures are very rarely found in the rock art sites of central India such as those found at Lakhajoar (Fig. 1.3a) and Urden (Fig. 1.3b). Depictions of female figures in fishing activities were found at a few rock art sites in central India such as Lakhajoar and Kathotia. Representations of a few female figures such as those found at Kathotia (Fig. 1.10) suggest various stages in the life of a woman.

Discussion

Assigning a chronological sequence to female figures on the basis of stylistic features, theme

and subject matter, superimpositions as well as associated with different types of human figures requires ones attention as such representations need to be studied in order to establish a relative chronological sequence as well as to identify their status in the indigenous communities. A few representations of stylised 'S' shaped female human figures at Kharwai (Figure 1a), Lakhajoar (Figure 1b) and Raisen (Figure 1c), Bhimbetka, etc. can be relatively assigned to Upper Palaeolithic period. The stick shaped female figures at Bhopal-Dharampuri (Figure 2), Lakhajoar (Figure 3a), Urden (Figure 3b) Bhimbetka (Figure 6), Maser, Karmodiya, and Gupha Masir were rarely found (Saleem and Chauhan 2019a&b; 2020). Similar stick shaped female figures such as those found at Lakhajoar (Figure 3a), Urden (Figure 3b) and Dumavli can be assigned to Mesolithic period. But the representations of stick shaped female figures found at Urden and Lakhajoar are very rarely found in the rock art sites of India (Saleem: 2019 *in press*). The square shaped female figures found in association with stick and square shaped human figures also require attention. Square shaped female figures found at Karmodiya (Fig.1.c) and Putli Karar (Fig.1.3d) are shown as wearing long skirt-like dress decorated with geometric patterns and carrying a basket. Five square shaped female figures at Karmodiya (Fig.1.3c) were shown as standing close to each other whereas one at Putli Karar is shown as carrying a basket-like object (Fig. 1.3d) (Saleem and Chauhan: 2019b).

Female figures found in different types of activities such as big and small game hunting, fishing, collection of fruits, roots and tubers, and honey collection not only suggests that they uses to take equal part in day-to-day activities but also in domestic activities such as food processing and food preparation, giving birth to children, nurturing, etc. The kind of role played by women right from the prehistoric time which has been recognised by various indigenous communities during different cultural periods and the women had gained a respectable and equal position in the society. As a result the women were

probably worshipped and it has been attested by the discovery of a number of terracotta female figurines found at a number of archaeological sites. However, no as such representations are found in the rock paintings. Representations of vulvas (Pradhan: 1995:5-15, 2005) as well as those of Lajja Gauri figures (Chandramouli: 2002) found at a few rock art sites in different parts of India and representation of a female figure found on a steatite seal (Parpola: 1994). have been identified as the symbols of fertility cult whereas the terracotta female figurines found at different Neolithic and Chalcolithic as well as Harappan sites were identified as Mother Goddess, but these representations do not have any parallels in rock art whereas the rock paintings of historic period found in the rock art sites of Pachmarhi group can be compared with those of Kushana sculptures (Neumayer: 1993, Ayyar 1976, Gordon and Gordon: 1939: 1-33, Dubey: 1991: 81-85). A bone harpoon found at Lohanda Nala (Misra: 1977) was initially assigned to the Upper Palaeolithic period and it was termed as a Mother Goddess, but later it was suggested as a well-made harpoon whereas a rubble platform found in the Upper Palaeolithic levels at Baghor was identified as a shrine (Kenoyer, *et al.*: 1983:23-28). But, so far no authentic representations of religious objects or figurines assigned to prehistoric and proto-historic periods are found in India.

Representations of female figures in various activities such as participating in the hunting of big and small game, fishing, fruit, roots and tubers, and honey collection, food processing as well as food preparation and dancing and playing games found in the Indian rock art sites suggests that have enjoyed an equal status in the society. But the identity and status of women have changed during subsequent cultural periods among different indigenous communities, and this scenario has been represented in the form of rock paintings and the women were restricted to domestic activities.

The efforts in ethnographic approach towards understanding the rock art of India may suggest

a somewhat different scenario. However, it may vary from one culture to the other (Pawar: 2013, Bulu Imam: 2014, Saleem: 2017: 59-82, Vikrama: 1996:55-59). It is a known fact that due to their importance in the society women have been elevated to a special status and a few among them might have been worshipped and the so-called 'Venus figurines' or Mother Goddess figurines were engraved, made and/or painted. In India such representations of women figures found at Bhimbetka are known as 'Venus Figurines' (Wakankar: 1973). But the study of female figures in Indian rock art suggests that the role of women had changed during subsequent cultural periods and they were restricted to domestic activities. But the female figures found in the historic period that were probably considered as goddesses were found and a few representations of female deities such as Lajja Gauri have been painted during historic period whereas the study of female figures found in the Indian rock art sites including those of Pachmarhi group in Hoshangabad District of Madhya Pradesh also gives a glimpse of their identity and importance (Dubey 1991: 81-85; Dubey-Pathak: 2020:20-37).

Comparative study of female figures in rock art

According to Solomon (1992) depictions of female figures found in San rock paintings suggests about shamanistic elements, trance dance, female initiation ceremony, social organisation and the complex of notions and practices surrounding feminine gender and female sexuality whereas Zubita's (2016) work on Chewa women in Africa suggests that the depictions of female figures in Chewa rock paintings indicates females as a tool to pass on the cultural knowledge about the initiation rites of females. The ethnographic study of the 'Late White' Paintings of the Bantu-speaking community suggests that they are related to various ritual activities such as rain-making, divination, appeasement of the ancestors and other spirits as well as initiation practices (Prince and Hall: 1994). According to Laming-

Emperaire (1970:197-215) depictions of human figures in European rock art are a form of social identity expression whereas according to Munoz and Duarte (2007:121-140) such representations are a communicative tool to pass on the cultural way of life.

Engraved, sculpted objects and figurines of human as well as animals made of bone, ivory, stone, antler, wood, tooth, claw, shells and clay were found across Europe, southern Africa, northern Asia and Australia among which dozens of female figurines found in Europe and Russia stand out prominently as 'Venus Figurines' that were probably used as offerings in fertility and reproduction ceremonies. The female figurine found in the Aurignacian levels of Hohle-Fels cave in Germany has broad hips and huge breasts but it has perforation in the head and the absence of facial features suggests that it was meant to be worn (Conard: 2009:248-252).

Though a large number of female figurines have been found in many parts of the world, the representations of female figures found in the rock art sites raise the question of how the depictions of female figures found in the rock paintings fit into the symbolic universe of indigenous groups. The answer to this question may lie in the types or kinds of scenes or activities (i.e., theme and subject matter including style of the rock paintings) they were shown in or drawn during different cultural periods. Study of style, theme and subject matter of such representations drawn during different cultural periods suggests the importance of women during various cultural periods. According to Zubeita (2016:13-28) the representations of female figures in Chewa rock paintings suggests about initiation rituals. But the meaning of a few representations of vulvas or female genitals found in the rock art sites of Odisha (Pradhan:1995: 5-15, 2001) and in other parts of India is not clear although they are considered as part of a fertility cult. Such representations in the form of engravings or paintings can be considered as of fertility cult and can be correlated to the representations of

Lajja Gauri at Chintakunta in Andhra Pradesh (Chandramouli: 2002). The ethnographic study of rock paintings found at Mallachandiram in Tamil Nadu, India indicates the rituals related to the departed ancestors. Rajan (1991) suggests about the living practice of drawing rock paintings at Mallachandiram as part of a ritual performed every year, and other such ethnographic studies at Miapur in central India and in Hazari Bagh region in upper Damodar Valley in Jharkhand (Bulu Imam: 2014: 74-80) will be helpful in terms of formulating ethnographic analogies. But such kind of ethnographic studies are helpful to understand the purpose of the rock paintings (in Iron Age and Historic period context), but it has to be observed carefully that what kind of paintings/motifs, symbols, etc. are being drawn and it is evenly important who is drawing the paintings and their purpose as well as meaning as it will help to formulate ethnographic analogies in order to know about the purpose of various types of

rock paintings including plants, animals, reptiles, humans, etc. (Saleem: 2017: 59-82). Because the ethnographic study of rock paintings found in the upper Damodar Valley in Jharkhand and Maharashtra suggest differently (Pawar: 2013). Hence, it is essential to study the representations of female figures found at various rock art sites in India in order to understand what kind of role they had played from prehistoric to historic periods in various indigenous communities and how the status or identity of women has changed during subsequent cultural periods. It is evenly important to study such representations on the basis of stylistic features, superimpositions, theme and subject matter in order to establish a relative chronological sequence as female figures have been drawn right from the beginning of rock art.

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Illustrations

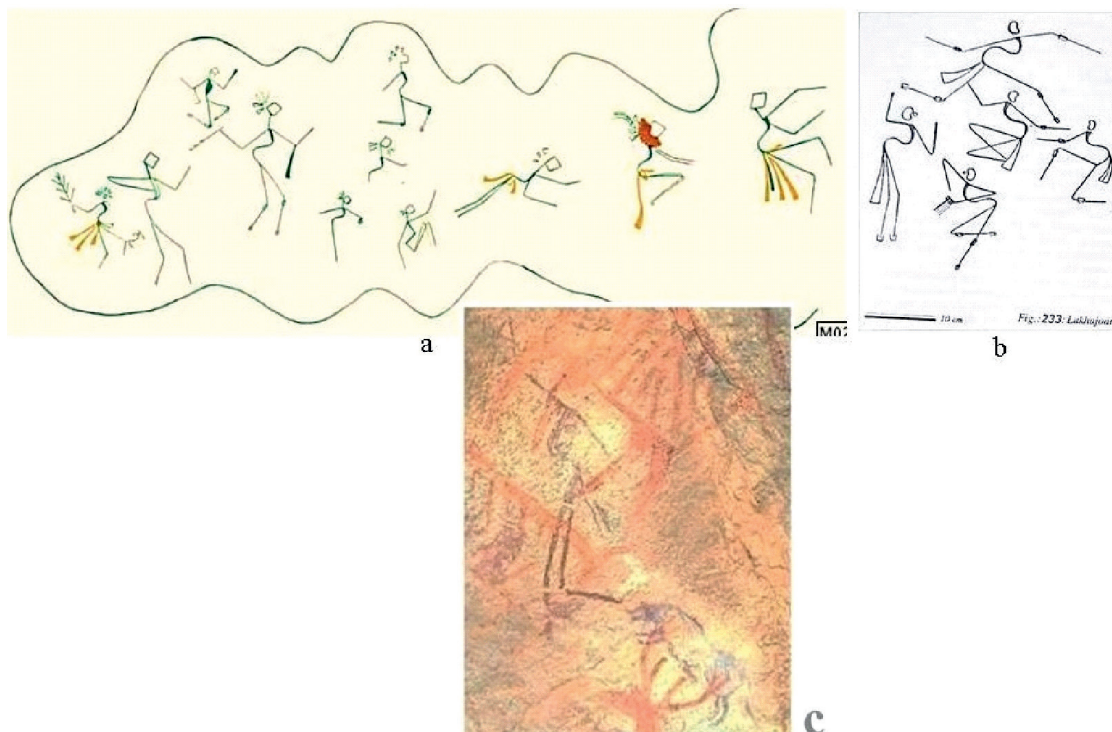


Fig. 1.1

'S' shaped female figures in dancing postures at Kharwai (a) and Lakhajour (b)

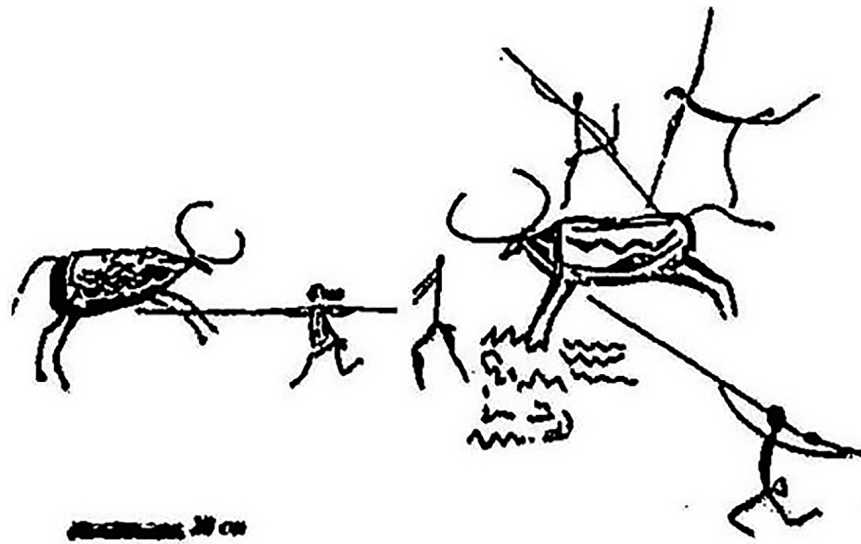


Fig. 1.2
Stick shaped female figure equipped with spear shown
in a hunting scene at Bhopal-Dharampuri

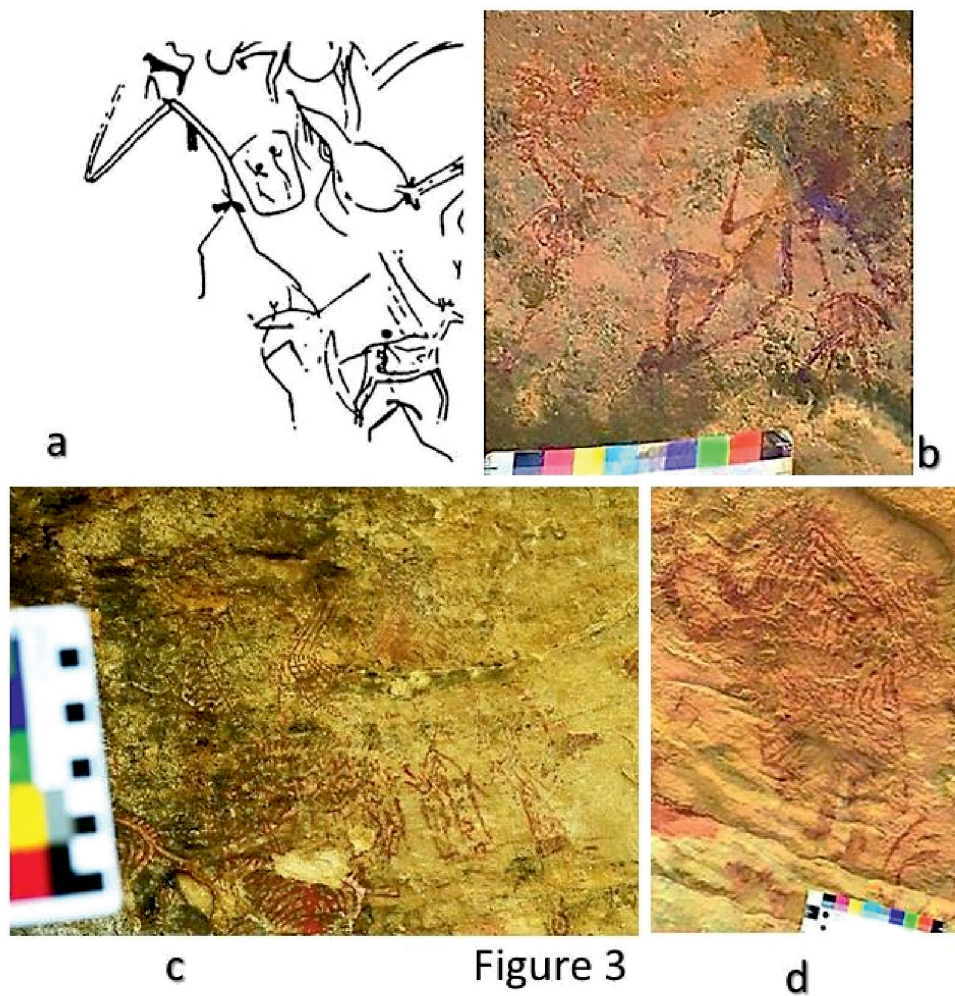


Figure 3

Fig. 1.3
Stick shaped female figure carrying children in a basket at Lakhajoar (a), stick shaped female figures in association with stick shaped male human figures at Urden (b), and square shaped female figures at Karmodiya (c) and Putli Karar (d)

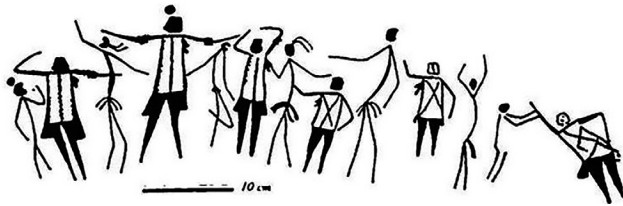


Fig. 1.4
Square shaped female figures in association with stick shaped human figures in a dancing scene at Kharwai



Fig. 1.5
Square shaped female figure associated with stick shaped human figures in a game or dance at Firengi

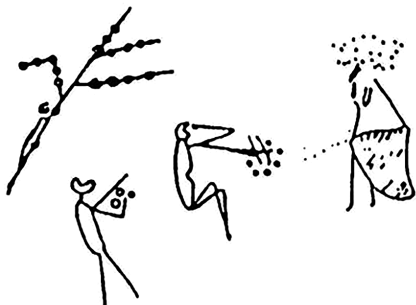


Fig. 1.6
Stick shaped female figure in fruit collection scene at Bhimbetka

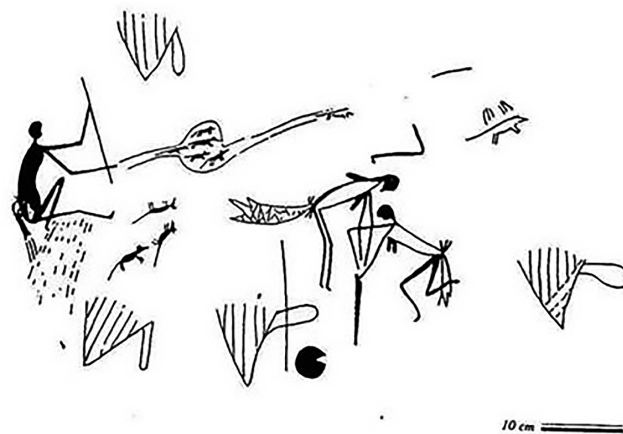


Fig. 1.7
Female figures using digging sticks in small game hunting at Jaora

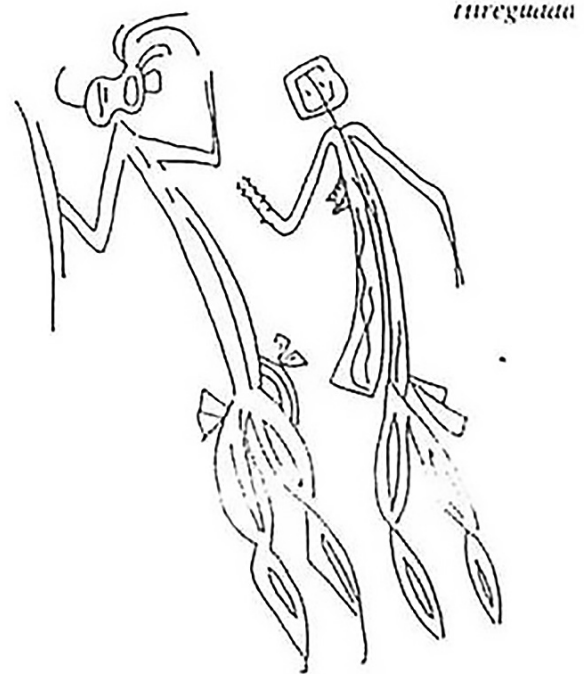


Fig. 1.8
Female figure associated with male human figure at Badami-Hirengudda

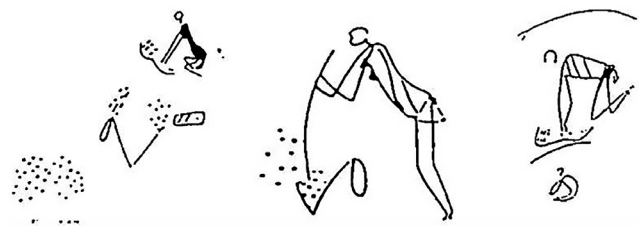


Fig. 1.9
Female figures in domestic activities at Kathotia



Fig. 1.10
Female figures shown in different stages of life at Kathotia

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