

CHAPTER 2

SHAMANISM

AND

ROCK ART

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The question that seems apparent here is in what way can shamanism be related to rock art? Indeed at present this word has turned out to be a vital terminology of rock art studies in many parts of the world, as archaeologists endeavour to get into the minds of the rock art artists. So any study dealing with interpretive issues on rock art would remain incomplete without an in-depth understanding of shamanism which is the most ancient form of humankind's religious, medical and psychological discipline. This chapter is devoted to understand neuropsychology and shamanism which are the recent approaches adopted towards rock art interpretation.

In the beginning years of this research work, rock art seemed to be an enigma and a puzzle art. Numerous questions regarding the existence of this vast art form kept pricking my mind. Visit to the rock art sites would leave me mesmerized, standing amidst images left by our ancestors, but without any understanding of its sense and purpose. I would forcibly convince all queries regarding presence of universal rock art with already existing explanations, like, 'art for art's sake', originally made by Edouard Piette in his study of mobile art (Ucko & Rosenfeld 1967: 118-19). The idea of a link between leisure and the development of aesthetic practices was first taken up by him. In 1864 Edouard Lartet and Henry Christy had argued that the environmental conditions of Upper Palaeolithic led to an abundance of animals that made hunting easy and so despite their primitiveness, people had plenty of leisure time to decorate themselves, their tools as well as their caves which served as their living spaces (Williams 2002a). Therefore study of this vast resource can throw light on the schematic images of everyday life of our ancestral societies, executed thousands of years ago. However such an explanation alone could not fill the void, for there was a feeling that the paintings contained many more things which were of much deeper connotations and with a potential that can take us way beyond a naïve understanding of the subject.

Around this time I came across a book titled “The Mind in the Cave” by David Lewis Williams. Williams is a professor emeritus and Senior Mentor in the Rock Art Research Institute, University of Witwaterstrand, Johannesburg. In his engrossing book he combined his lifetime of anthropological research with recent neurological insights to the human mind in order to understand Upper Palaeolithic rock art. Following the track of evolution of the human mind he argues that our ancestors possessed a more advanced neurological make-up, enabling them to undergo altered state of consciousness and experience **shamanistic trances** along with vivid **mental imagery** as part of their rituals (Both of these concepts will be explained in detail in the later part of this chapter). With such intense and vibrant neurological experiences these men felt it a necessity to paint these images on the cave walls. To them these walls served to be a membrane between their world and the supernatural, or to be more specific, the spirit world (spirits of ancestors as well as evil spirits and demons) from which they believed they got the visions. His argument is based on a combination of study of San art in southern Africa and a **three stage neuropsychological model** which consists of the universal **entoptic phenomenon** as well as culturally controlled visual **hallucinations** (concept will be discussed in detail in this section). San people of Southern Africa made rock art till the second half of the nineteenth century and it serves as an excellent case study for the ways in which mental imagery can be translated into rock art. However as Williams puts it that this does not try to argue by analogy from the case studies to the art of the Upper Palaeolithic; instead Southern African San rock art or Northern American rock art made by the Native Americans, is merely used to provide enlightening instances of what can happen when mental imagery is turned into visual imagery on rocks and in caves (Williams 2002a; 10).

In India unfortunately rock art has not been made for a very long time and since none of the ethnic groups associate themselves with this art form therefore it’s first hand meaning and purpose has long been gone. Infact at present there is no bridge that can afford access to the meanings of rock art of India, starting from Upper Paleolithic to Historic period. However certain forms, and themes represented in rock art are common worldwide, like

geometric motifs. Since rock art is a universal phenomenon, found almost in all geographical and temporal regions of human civilization, with plenty of similarities, therefore there lies a common thread to its purpose. After going through Lewis Williams's theory which is based on **universality** of the **human nervous system** and the **hunter gatherer setting** (Lewis Williams 2002b, 240), I have felt it necessary to speculate if this neuropsychological model can be applied to understand some forms seen in Indian rock art, in the absence of any directly relevant ethnography. More so because certain aspects like the geometric forms represented in Indian rock art are very similar to the ones referred by Williams in his study of Upper Palaeolithic art. (It needs mention here that evidence of entoptic forms are seen in rock art worldwide beginning from Upper Palaeolithic to Historic times) In recent years the field of psychology and neurology has been brought into rock art studies and is very much in vogue elsewhere in the world. Therefore a need was felt to delve into this aspect in order to gain an all encompassing insight into the subject. Interestingly the entoptic visions are products of basic neural architecture of the human brain, therefore all people who enter certain altered state of consciousness, no matter wherever geographical location they belong to and from whatever cultural background, are going to sense them in the same way (Williams 2002a). Now as mentioned earlier, few themes are common, like the geometric forms comprising of zigzags, dots, spirals and curves which are said to be witnessed in early stages of visual hallucinations (as per the neuropsychological model), is a recurring theme seen in India's rock art, mostly depicted on the large rock canvasses, at times on animal images (fig 3a.14) and at times separately depicted (Fig 3a.5). In addition, there are many instances of surreal situations in Indian rock art which match with some of the peculiar characteristics which are usually associated with mental imagery, in an altered state of consciousness. Some of these include: (i) depiction of a figure (mostly animal/human) in x-ray form, shown without flesh, only bones (ii) upside down figures floating around (iii) human like figures displaying both human and animal characteristics (iv) superimpositions, where an artist has put his image on top of another depiction (v) bees and bee-hives and finally (vi) dance and percussion. All these themes which are usually associated with the entoptic experiences and the spiritual world is, also

seen in rock art of India. These themes are crucial to the interpretation of the rock. Therefore this research work is solely dedicated to explore the thought processes that may have worked behind making of rock art in India, the possibility that some of India's rock art motifs may have originated in an altered state. It also wishes to speculate if this art form is a consequence of rituals, involving shamanism and whether some of the representations are reflections of mental imagery rather than images from the real world.

The above observation will be supported by examples throughout the course of the thesis. A thorough study on rock art from all corners of the world has revealed that, almost everywhere it was made to serve some purposes, be it as part of some fertility rite, for better hunt, as a totem or for curing the sick. However, the thesis does not attempt to explain all of India's rock art as reflection of shamanistic trance only, as there are many other occasions which may have inspired making of rock art. For example as it has been observed that in many countries including India there are wide occurrences of myths being associated with rock art. Therefore Indian mythology will also be referred wherever necessary, in the study. The number and variety of rock art from India is so great and created over such a long span of time that we get many examples to satisfy each and every hypothesis.

So, this study is based on two sets of data, one is direct ethnographic evidences in the form of painting rituals on rock surface by people, primarily in Africa, America and second is the nature and subject matter of the paintings from India. I have searched for clues to see if the universal entoptic elements are reflected in rock art of India. This satisfies many doubts that usually prick one's mind on viewing rock art and it seems that the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle have fallen into its places, thereby giving the complete picture. Here I would like to recall that on a visit to Bhimbetka rock shelters I talked to the villagers in the nearby village of Miapur, regarding their understanding of the images made in the rock shelters. Some came up with logical reasoning like the cave dwellers were, primitive men, who used to hunt animals for food, and during their leisure time they made these images on the walls of their living spaces simply for decoration purpose.

However there was one person named Babulal, the senior most man in the village of Miapur nearing his 100th year. He said that as heard from his parents and grandparents these paintings were made by 'bhoot, prèt' (local term for evil spirits) and their cries along with drum beats could be heard from the mountains. Initially I did not take this explanation seriously but later on I realized that Babulal had probably said something very significant, as dance associated with drumbeats is an important factor in any ancient ritual practice. Actually, in primitive societies people could only turn to Nature and supernatural elements in search of remedies to their daily problems. As Dr. Sadashiba Pradhan writes on the 'Sauras' (a tribe of Orissa) that 'when the primitive mind fails to comprehend the cause of any unnatural tragedies like earthquake or killer epidemics or even attacks by tiger or other ferocious animals, they draw icons to appease the malevolent spirits responsible for the tragedy as they believe' (Pradhan 2001, 69). So, here enters the role of the **shaman** who simply acts as an intermediary, a priest cum doctor who would conduct the rituals. He is believed to possess powers with which he/she can provide solutions to the problems by seeking help from supernatural elements. Since shamanism constitutes an integral part of ritual practices in any aboriginal community and since there are enough ethnographic evidences suggesting its association with rock art therefore one needs to form a thorough idea about this and also about ethnic groups who have and still carry out this practice.

2.2 SHAMANISM

Shamanism is the most ancient of humankind's religious, medical and psychological discipline. It is a tradition that preceded all modern religions and dealt primarily with healing by means of spiritual contacts. Infact it functioned as a religion in ancient societies, where people could fall back on the supernatural in their day to day problems as the society was far away from a scientific culture. There is no way of assessing just how remote its origins may be as Eliade claims that "nothing justifies the supposition that during the hundreds of years that preceded the earliest Stone Age, humanity did not have a religious life as intense and as various as in the succeeding periods" (Eliade 1964).

The term itself comes from the word 'saman' of the Tungus people of Siberia, Central Asia, where a living tribal healing process was thoroughly observed and documented in the 19th century (Williams 2002a). It means 'one, who is excited, moved, raised' (Walsh 1990, 8). Interestingly it may have been derived from an ancient Indian word meaning 'to heat oneself or practice austerities' or also from Tungus verb meaning 'to know'. By and large, the term shaman has been widely adopted by anthropologists to refer to specific group of healers in diverse cultures who have sometimes been called medicine men, witch doctors, sorcerers, wizards, magicians or seers. A specific group of healers who claim to revere spirits, to see or even be possessed by them.

Role of a shaman

General belief among ancient societies was that Nature is alive with supernatural elements. Spirit of the ancestors hover around and they require careful propitiation. It was also believed that, all of man's ills are derived ultimately from the spirit world. So malevolent spirits need to be subdued which can be done only by a Shaman.

A Shaman is an individual, (he/she) who possesses the unique quality of rising above normal human consciousness and can travel and operate among different 'planes'. (In shamanistic term the word 'planes' refer to different worlds like present world and spirit world). He/she acts as an intermediary between the natural and invisible spiritual world, therefore acting as a guardian of a tribe's overall health and welfare. As per the shamanistic belief the rituals of birth, puberty, marriage, attaining a social rank (status) and death are believed to be moments of transition in any individual's life, when a person is in grave danger as he/she 'dies' in terms of his/her former self and has not yet been reborn into his new identity. At these moments of vulnerability, it is the shaman who accompanies the individual's soul across the uncertain gulf. Therefore, the shaman serves as a bridge between this world and the next, acting as a 'soul guide' to ease these life passages.

A shaman is capable of achieving the following ends. He/she can promote and increase order, health (heal the sick), wealth and happiness of individuals and also the entire tribe. He/she is capable to appease the ancestors and protect against evil influences (demons, illness, bad luck). He/she can control the movements and lives of animals and also change the weather. The remarkable similarities among shamans from widely dispersed areas of the world are very intriguing and often raise the question as to how these similarities might have developed? However that is another aspect which is not pertinent in this study. Shamanism is still in practice in many parts of the world mainly amongst various ethnic tribes, who still have not seen the light of education and as mentioned before unaware about the scientific culture. The above conclusions regarding the role of a shaman in a tribal society is based on through study of San shamans in southern Africa, along with shamans of North America, Australia, Nepal and India (Orissa).

2.3 SHAMANISM AND ART

In order to understand this hypothesis we need to turn to those societies who made rock art until recently, from where the practice of shamanistic trances and associated mental imagery being projected on rock shelters has been reported. In this regard Tacon (Tacon 1991:11-18) has said that “Analogies add an ethnographic perspective to prehistoric datawhen group of people has no surviving counterparts, analogies should be based on cultures that exploit similar environments in similar way”. In almost all the ethnographic information available for rock art, the ‘shaman’ is seen to play a vital role. Moreover it needs mention that according to Lewis Williams & Dowson (Lewis Williams & Dowson 1988:213), the implication that some form of shamanism more than likely occurred in the Upper Palaeolithic has been put forward by other researchers also. Some of them include Lommel (1967); Eliade (1972); Eichmeier and Höfer (1974); Furst (1976) Halifax (1982) and others. As already mentioned, David Lewis William’s (Lewis Williams 2002a & b) research has been based in two main areas, neuropsychological and ethnographic studies which will be discussed in the following section.

Southern African Rock Art

In search of a purpose behind making of rock art images I would like to refer to two case studies from South Africa and North America, cited by David Lewis Williams (Lewis Williams 2002a) in his 'Mind in the Cave'. Firstly he writes about the San /Bushmen tribes who are known to have made rock art till the second half of 19th century in the Drakensberg mountains in Kalahari desert. San community is originally (4000 years old) a mixture of nomads named Khoi-Khoi with established hunter-gatherers of Southern Africa. (The latter had occupied most parts of southern Africa for over 50 000 years), 'San' means food gatherer. Another group of hunter gatherers living on the Savannah region of South Africa were named by the Dutch colonists as 'Boschesmannen'. Hence the name Bushmen. The Bushmen are the longest-term inhabitants of Southern Africa and they are the last survivors of a Stone-Age people who were once scattered all over Eastern, Central and Southern Africa. (Ref: internet site sponsored by Endlotane Studios, Swaziland). Bushman and San rock art, found in Zimbabwe and South Africa consist of thousands of paintings and engravings on rock surfaces. It is one of South Africa's greatest cultural treasures. Today only a few thousands San survive in the Kalahari Desert of recent Botswana. In the 1870's a German linguist named Wilhelm Bleek had gone to southern Africa to prepare a grammar of the Zulu language (William 2002a). During his stay at the British colony of Natal where the Zulu's lived, he came to know of the San community who lived in the high Drakensburg mountains. Bleek was so intrigued with their language that he gave up his Zulu research and took the initiative to learn the San language. Together with the help of his co-worker Lucy Lloyd (also his sister-in law) wrote more than 12,000 pages of notes on San myths, accounts of rituals, personal histories and much about their daily life (Lewis- Williams 2002a). Bleek and Lloyd came to know that the Sans made rock paintings and engravings (a San man named Dia kwain had opened the window on his people's belief and religion, the detail of which I am not going into, for my main field of research is India). They also came to know of the concepts of !gi:xa ,(a san word meaning a person male or female filled with supernatural potency) a 'medicine man' or 'medicine woman' now universally called 'shaman', about their 'trance performances' associated with mystic drum beats which in turn helped

them to achieve 'control over antelope herds' or bring rainfall. The most interesting point is when these San men were shown some copies of rock paintings they could identify the shaman in the rock pictures.

Even today, the San people believe in a spiritual realm that is inhabited by God and his family, His vast herd of animals, spirits of dead people and strange monsters. It is these spirits who shoot 'arrows of sicknesses into the living people. Therefore it is the task of the San shaman to activate their supernatural powers and travel into the spirit realm in order to perform the curing task. This activity is performed at a 'Medicine', 'Healing' or 'Trance' dance, in dreams or at a 'Special Curing' only when a few people are present. Men, women, children and visitors can attend the dance. In Kalahari region today though there is only one standardized pattern of the dance, variations are present in further south region. Present day pattern is circular, with a fire lighted up in the middle. The fire is believed to be the source of potency. Around it women sit in tight circles with their shoulders touching. They sing and clap the 'medicine songs that are believed to contain potency. Outside the women circle the men dance in another circle. They stamp the rhythm of the dance and accentuate it with the swishing sound of their rattles that they tie around their calves. They carry fly whisks (only during the dance) made from animal tails to flick away the arrows of sickness. By use of prolonged rhythmic movement, audio driving, and intense concentration (along with swift and shallow breathing exercises) the shaman, induces the altered state of consciousness and enters a trance. During the dance the female shaman in the san community, sometimes rises from their circle around the fire and join the men with more graceful steps and gestures. Dances begin lightheartedly, but slowly gathers intensity and by the night the surroundings are filled with the songs, sounds and cries of the shamans. During deep trance the shaman's spirit are believed to leave their bodies through the top of the head. It seems that the walls of the rock shelters were thought of as a 'veil' suspended between the world and the spirit realm. Shamans pass through this veil and on their return, brought with them revelations of what was happening in the world beyond. It seems likely that the shaman painted (though there is no evidence to suggest that only the shamans painted) the images coming through into the

world of the living and the visions of the transformations they experienced in the spirit world. Therefore the walls of the shelters, along with the paintings of the shamans become gateways that afforded ordinary people to access realms that they could not visit otherwise (Lewis Williams 2002a:149).

North American Rock Art

The second case study is North American rock art, where ethnographic evidences of Chumash community who lived on west coast of North America, suggest that magic and supernatural power play a prominent role in most of their narratives (Blackburn 1975: 23). Infact dealing with Columbia Plateau region alone, James Keyser and Whitley (Whitley 2000) has listed 19 references in ethnographic reports to an association between rock art and shamanistic vision quests. For example Ake Hultkranz (Hultkranz 1987) a member from a community called Wind River Shoshoni (Lewis Williams 2002a: 167) who still live in some of their ancestral territories in the Wind River Valley and the Grand Teton, Wyoming, has described vision quests amongst the Shoshoni community which further corroborates our understanding, as they have direct historical relationship with the rock art of that region. Some more ethnographic reports (Lewis Williams 2002a:168) indicate that Native American people believed that rock images were made not by the quester(the shaman) but by the spirits commonly named as 'water babies', 'rock babies', or 'mountain dwarves'. These spirits were supposed to be a shaman's spirit helper which can only be seen in an altered state of consciousness. According to Maurice Zigmund (Zigmund 1986: 406-07), amongst the Kawaiisu of south-central California, it is believed that a spirit named Rock Baby dwelt in the rock and made rock paintings. Therefore if one returned to a rock art site and found that more images had appeared since one's previous visit, they were said to be handiwork of a Rock Baby. If a person touched a rock painting and then rubbed one's own eyes, sleeplessness and death could result. Thus they believed that the images possessed inherent power and were not merely pictures.

In 1920's Glenn Ranck found that 'one night a Wishram medicine man (shaman) used an unseen power to paint a pictograph during the night. He was found in a trance at the foot of the pictograph the next morning (Keyser and Whitley 2000: 20). Therefore these

reports help us to realize the link between North American shamans and rock art. However, based on ethnographic reports we should also keep in mind that it was not just shamanistic visions that led to making of rock art in North America, as we see in Southern California puberty ceremonies culminated in rock paintings (Lewis Williams 2002a: 170). In these rituals in Southern California, boys and girls learned religious and moral truths and correct behaviour. They also ingested hallucinogens like boys had jimsonweed and girls took tobacco. At the climax of the rituals the initiates took part in a race to a designated rock. The winner of the race was believed to enjoy longevity. After the race, the initiates made rock art images on the rocks, which were supervised by shamans (Lewis Williams 2002a: 171). So far, these are only some of the ethnographic reports from South Africa as well as North America which supports our study.

2.4 PHOSPHENES/FORMCONSTANTS:

A NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL

Before discussing ethnographic case studies from India and Nepal I would first discuss the three stage neuropsychological model that has been propounded by noted archaeologist and rock art researcher, David Lewis Williams along with T.A Dowson in 1988. They wished to develop a model for classifying and addressing the Upper Palaeolithic signs as it can never be explained with simplistic ethnographic analogy, for Upper Palaeolithic art has no real current counterpart. Interestingly the neuropsychological research explains some of the forms of certain depictions, not the meanings, which can only be established from directly relevant ethnography (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988: 201). This model is based upon images formed by the human optic system during altered states of consciousness. According to Lewis Williams (2002a) there are three stages of consciousness, each of which is characterized by particular kinds of imagery and experiences. They are named as follows; **entoptic phenomenon** which includes **phosphenes** (induced by physical stimulation, like pressure on eyeball, thus within the eye), **form constants** (derived from the optic system, probably

beyond the eyeball,); and **hallucinations** (having no foundation in the actual structure of the optic system,). The hallucinations include iconic visions of culturally controlled items such as animals as well as somatic (in the body) aural (hearing), gustatory (taste) and olfactory (smell) experiences (Lewis Williams 2002a, 127).

Laboratory tests in search of a link between rock art and hallucinations have already been carried out in the west (Siegel 1985). An interesting point to note here is that there are strong evidences that chimpanzees, baboons, monkeys, cats, dogs and other animals hallucinate (Siegel and Jarvik 1975, 81-104). So, this suggests that hallucinations and altered states of consciousness are a function of the mammals in general and not only human nervous system. In this case, during artificial laboratory tests LSD drug were applied to individuals in order to induce a trance like feeling artificially, and then study the visions that occurred. These test results were then compared with rock art images. Reports on visual hallucinations provided very precise descriptions of three stages. (Lewis Williams 2002a: 126) (See fig 2.1).

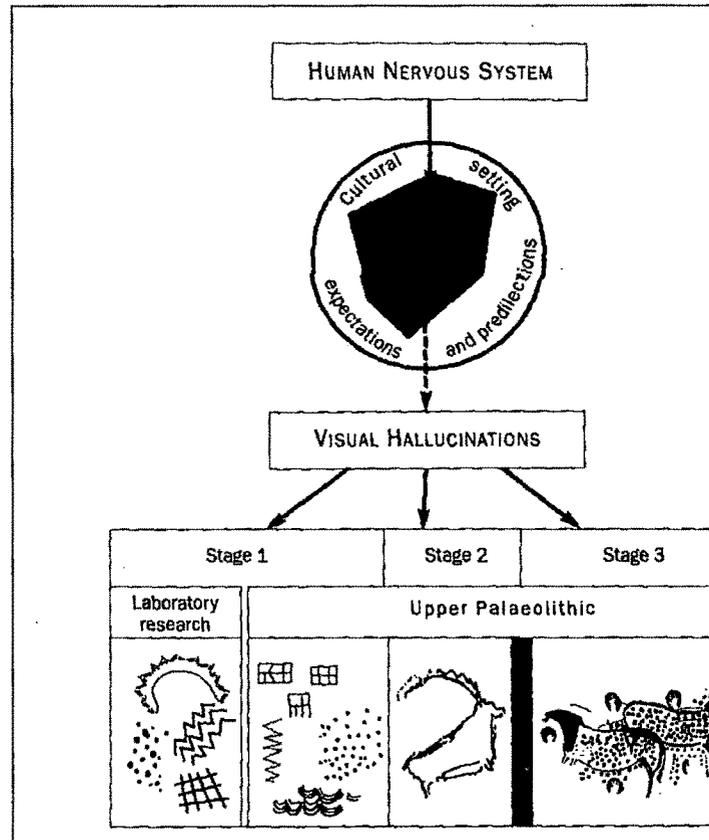


Fig 2.1 (Ref- Lewis Williams; The mind in the Cave, Fig: 26)

The research shows that in the **early stages** an individual sees geometric forms, such as grids, zigzags, dots, spirals and curves. This will probably help us to understand the presence of large number of geometric designs (intricate geometric patterns) very similar to the pre-figurative art seen in rock art of India. The images seen during the laboratory tests are all shimmering, incandescent, mercurial and powerful. These forms of pulsating, iridescent geometric imagery known as phosphenes and form constants are together called **entoptic phenomenon** are experienced principally in the first stage of altered consciousness which also persists in the later stages. Entoptic images which mean “within vision”, as they are derived within the visual system. The recurring entoptic forms consist of basic grid and its development in a lattice and expanding hexagonal pattern, sets of parallel lines, dots and short flecks, zigzag lines crossing the field of vision, nested catenary curves and thin meandering lines. In **stage two** the individual tries

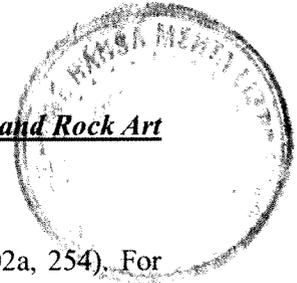
to make sense of entoptic phenomenon by elaborating them into iconic forms, which are usually objects that are familiar to them from their daily life. The results may vary depending on the individuals own culture and present problem. During altered states of consciousness, the nervous system becomes like any other sense impression (visual, aural, or tactile), which produces a variety of images including entoptic phenomena. The brain acts accordingly and tries to decode these impressions like any other sensory impression during a normal state of consciousness (Horowitz 1975:177). For example a series of curves may be depicted as hills or the same curves as waves depending on what the subject is thinking. San shamans are seen to depict series of curves as honeycombs. Usually to the Sans, bees are considered to be messengers of gods therefore the shamans try to harness its potency in order to enter the trance. In **stage three**, the individual witnesses a feeling of a vortex or rotating tunnel around them and while in this state they start seeing iconic images which are derived from memory and are often associated with powerful emotional experiences (Siegel and Jarvik 1975:128), images also change one into the other (Grof 1975: 38-39: illustrates how an image of a clock tower can change into an owl). Nevertheless, even in this essentially iconic stage, entoptic phenomenon may persist and iconic imagery may be projected against a background of geometric forms (Siegel 1977, 134) or entoptic phenomenon may frame iconic imagery (Reichel-Dlomatoff 1978, 147). By a process of fragmentation and integration, compound images are formed: for example a man with zigzag legs. Finally in this stage subjects feel to be part of a strange realm. They blend with both their geometric and iconic imagery (Kluver 1942: 181, 182). It is in this 'final stage' that people sometimes feel themselves to be turning into animals (Siegel & Jarvik 1975: 105) and undergoing other frightening or exalting transformations. These neurologically generated commonalities account, in large measure, for the striking and often surprising similarities of shamanism worldwide (Lewis Williams 2002b, 222). Therefore some of the geometric motifs that have been found in rock art of India which are very similar to the entoptic forms.

	ENTOPTIC PHENOMENA		SAN ROCK ART		COSO	PALEOLITHIC ART			
	A	B	ENGRAVINGS	PAINTINGS		MOBILE ART		PARIETAL ART	
			C	D		F	G	H	I
I									
II									
III									
IV									
V									
VI									

Fig 2.2 (Ref- Lewis Williams; A cosmos in stone, from fig: 8.2)

Having established the three stage entoptic model Lewis Williams turned to the rock art made by the San communities in order to find similarities (as ethnographic evidences had already suggested that this art was shamanistic), and accordingly found all the entoptic signs present in their rock art. Images referable to all the three stages of the entoptic phenomenon were present (see fig. 2.2). The same model was applicable to two other arts which were known to be shamanistic. They were Tukano bark and house paintings (Reichel- Dolmatoff 1978) and North American Coso rock art (Whitley 1998). However it is interesting to note that art that is known not to be associated with altered states of consciousness like Rembrandt's work, this model of entoptic phenomenon does not fit in (Lewis Williams 2002b, 198). The model can thus confirm or reject the hypothesis that the images of atleast many arts derived from the visions and experiences of altered states of consciousness (Lewis Williams 2002b).

Nonetheless it is not that the study of these paintings means only shamanic visions and therefore has no touch with reality. As Lewis Williams rightly puts in that many paintings



contain observable reality as well as spiritual reality (Lewis Williams 2002a, 254). For example in the dance paintings the dancer's dress, ornaments, musical instruments, are all observable reality while physical transformations, elongated bodies, big eyes (all these examples will be studied in detail in course of the thesis) are spiritual reality which is only seen by the shaman. A representation of an animal figure may seem apparently real but certain features are present (which we will see in plenty while discussing animal figures) which suggests presence of nonreal elements. Therefore rock paintings or engravings contain both visionary as well as realistic images.

2.5 ROCK ART OF INDIA

Now, I turn to rock art of India to examine if some of it had originated in altered state of consciousness, whether shamanism is still in practice amongst tribes and if that leads to any kind of image making. Interestingly, certain themes and even motifs, to be more specific are common in rock art irrespective of their geographical locations. In the west these have already been interpreted (according to the neuropsychological model) to be symbolic representations made as part of some ritual involving shamans. Rock art of India also contain many unexplained geometric signs, sometimes placed on animal bodies and at times done separately. The neurological model of David Lewis Williams can help us to explain these intricate geometric signs. We must remember here that the entoptic visions are products of basic neural architecture of the human brain, therefore anybody who is in certain altered state of consciousness, irrespective of geographical location and cultural background, are going to sense them in the same way (Lewis Williams, 2002a). Besides geometric figures there are a range of depictions like the bees, monsters, demons, defied or composite animals (body like boar with trunk like an elephant's) fish, turtles, palm prints, group dances, elaborate head embellishments, individual dancers with raised hands and above all clustering of a single rock face with number of images (all these various types of depictions are symbolic and associated with spiritual quest of the shamans), encourages one to speculate and search for peculiarities which can suggest that certain portions of Indian rock art probably consisted symbols and metaphors reflecting a

spirit realm. Moreover there is evidence that sound and music plays an important role in shamanistic rituals as it helps in inducing a trance by providing hypnotic rhythm (Williams 2002b: 266). Therefore the number of musical instruments seen in rock art of India further strengthens this understanding.

However it needs mention here that apart from purely shamanistic rituals(for example aimed to cure the sick or to ward off an evils spirit etc.) some more occasions in which rock art was made has been put forward by researchers. These are totemistic rituals (Layton 2000:179), hunting magic (Turpin 1992:295), fertility rituals and recording of astronomical events (Plog 1997:101). Moreover local mythology is also believed to have been depicted in rock art of any given area. Rock art being a universal phenomenon, these theories are applicable even in the Indian context. For example the Upper Palaeolithic engraved core found at Chandravati, Rajasthan (Sonawane 1997: 11-14) supports the symbolic representation of a mother goddess and fertility rituals. This can be concluded as evidences of triangular shaped natural sandstone with concentric laminations in the form of triangles were found at Upper Palaeolithic site of Bhagor 1 in Son valley, Madhya Pradesh (Kenoyer et.al. 1983). Similar colourful natural stones as symbols of Mother Goddess are worshipped by local Koli and Bhaiga tribes today.

In India unfortunately, the present tribal and folk group do not associate themselves with such art in their areas except to explain it as the work of evil spirits or epic heroes (Chakravarty and Bednarik 1997:31). The local belief of some villagers including Babulal, the senior most person in Miapur village, in the vicinity of Bhimbetka rock shelters (central India) is that witches and ghosts come in the night to make rock art (personal communication). Almost similar opinion is also expressed in Orissa (eastern India) where the local people feel that these works are made by heavenly bodies or ghosts and they therefore consider it a taboo to even touch these works of art (Pradhan 2001:27). However in order to address the issue of shamanism leading to the creation of rock art, recorded shamanism within India must be considered. Most of the present day tribal communities have shamans who take care of the tribe by warding of evil spirits.

2.6 MORE ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMPLES

In India the most important reference comes from the Saura tribes of Orissa. Saura art is directly linked with shamanism. Sauras make their paintings in their houses and not on caverns of rock shelters and boulders. The following information has been obtained from data reported by Dr.Sadashiba Pradhan by interviewing elders of the Saura community, conversant with the community traditions as well as different aspects of art and religion, and the artists themselves (Pradhan 2001).

Sauras are known for their paintings and engravings. For the Saura community, 'Art' performs an important function in their life. It is not done during leisure time. Comparative study done by researchers reveals that the basic character of the Saura art has remained unchanged, like the associated beliefs, myths and rituals. To be more specific , since the last 50 years (beginning with Elwin) except little changes that have taken place as a result of acculturation, education or use of synthetic colours from local markets, the basic socio religious character behind the purpose of the art has remained unchanged. What we come to know from these interactions is that firstly the Saura art (especially the hill Sauras) is inspired and directed mainly by religion, secondly the making process of the paintings is elaborate. Sauras draw icons for anything related to their general well being and success .They believe that they live in association with the supernatural entities, so they turn to them whenever they face any difficulty in their struggle for existence. Whenever they are faced with unnatural tragedy like an earthquake, epidemic, or even attacks by ferocious animals as well as diseases, the Sauras attribute its cause to the Gods and spirits. They feel that as a remedial measure the supernatural beings need to be pleased and pacified, and this they do by drawing.

The process of image making is usually carried out in three stages by the Saura's. In **stage one** when a member of a family falls ill or in any unusual situation the village shaman (kuranmaran) is called to identify the cause of the suffering. Usually the shaman is able to identify the spirit or the power that has caused the problem, by a process in which he rubs white rice (arua or unboiled rice) on a winnowing fan and utters

incantations till the spirit is identified. It is now the duty of the head of the household to make the arrangements to pacify the spirit, in whose honour the icon has to be drawn. In **stage two** the picture man (ittalmaran) is called, before which all necessary arrangements are made for him to draw the picture. The day before drawing is performed, the house wall is given a red wash with locally available hematite clay mixed with water by the housewife. In certain cases if the shaman has not been able to identify the spirit whose picture has to be drawn then the picture man sleeps beside the designated wall in order to get a dream and identify the spirit. On the day of the painting all the members of the family including the picture man takes their bath. Rice, fruits, vermilion, lamp, ghee, incense sticks and a pot of wine is placed next to the walls designated for the ritual drawing. The picture man seeks blessing of important gods and spirits and offers some wine on the earth as well as on the wall. He himself drinks some wine and asks for mercy in case any mistake is committed (Elwin 1951). He then concentrates and makes the picture with white paste (rice paste mixed with water) and brush made out of bamboo split or palm twigs. He visualizes the entire composition in accordance with the occasion and his mental imagery finds expression on the walls of the house. Usually, in Saura art a house for the supernatural entity is made first which is represented with a square or rectangle (in some cases if the shaman knows how to draw then he too can paint.) In **stage three** the shaman is called who invites the spirits by going in a trance. The spirits then expresses the cause of its anger through the mouth of the shaman. In this case criticisms uttered by the spirit are like; he wanted a comb or a bicycle, things that were dear to him. The picture man immediately compensates these deficiencies by drawing it on the wall thereby making the composition overcrowded. After the picture is completed the elaborate ritual of consecrating the idol is performed by the shaman. Animals are sacrificed and the blood of this sacrificed animal is smeared on the painting along with plenty of other offerings. The shaman concludes by hanging a new earthen pot from the roof against the picture.

For another example to support our study we turn to tribal art of the Himalayas which is characterized primarily by its links with shamanism (Chazot 1988) though here too the

canvass is not rock shelters and boulders. Over the centuries the Himalayas have been home to a variety of ethnic groups belonging to Mongoloid or Indo-Aryan descent. Over the centuries, the Hindus have contributed the caste system of social organization to the Himalayas, and the Buddhists a more democratic and individual approach to freedom. However, beneath this overlay, the traditional shamans who still struggle to drive out evil forces and master the powers of spirits, demons, and local deities irrespective of the presence of the two main religions. Orthodoxy and ritual purity are preserved by the Brahmans and the Lamas, but in everyday life people still have room for the shamans and their protective deities. In this section we will discuss few of those art forms ('Art and Shamanism in the Himalayas' on website titled [tribalarts_com.htm](http://tribalarts.com.htm)) which display some striking similarities with rock art of India. Himalayan tribal art is not a degenerated form of classical art; it usually illustrates different subjects and refers to beliefs and cults which are foreign to Buddhism and Hinduism. It is mostly the people belonging to tribes as well as the untouchables who make these works.

Tribal art of the Himalayas constitute of wooden masks and figures. The figures are found only in western Nepal while art in the east focuses on masks. Western Nepal was once part of a vast empire dominated by the Khas people, who had migrated from India in the beginning of 7th century, and mingled with the native tribes. Figurative art developed in the western regions, where figures were advised to be made by the shaman, with an intention to act as a guard to the family and the house, the community and its territory against evil or hostile spirits. These beautiful, statues are sober and stylized. Most are carved from wood, rarely some in stone. Tribal art in the form of wooden figures are seen on the flat roofed houses usually belonging to lower caste villagers. These statues are seen either in standing, sitting or crouching positions, with hands joined in prayer. These figures act as protectors and are believed to brave all hazards.

Next, it is the temples which contain art. The decoration consists of wooden carvings ranging from geometric motifs to human or animal figures such as elephants or snakes. The terminals of the pillars are sometimes carved in the shape of a rams head, this animal

being the shamans sacrificial animal. The statues, located at the outskirts of the villages, are dedicated to the ancestors. The figure is often in a seated or standing position, hands joined in prayer. Sometimes dozens of statues are found piled in a shelter, which is usually just a peaked roof of disjointed planks. Ethnographic information suggests that each statue symbolizes a deceased individual. The spirits of the dead are treated with respect and fear. Figural carvings are also seen on bridges, mountain passes, crossroads, at the confluence of two rivers and on water springs, for in the mountainous land Gods and spirits are perceived to be everywhere.

Another very interesting group of wooden statues depict sexually explicit male and female figures, where the male is also seen playing the drum. Among the shamans of western Nepal there are said to be magical sexual practices which are more or less comparable to tantric cults. Unfortunately, owing to strict secrecy preserved by the shamans who actually know about these strange wooden models, we don't get the real interpretation for the existence of these figures. However there definitely lies a link between shamanism and this type of iconography. Quoting Eric Chazot and Jean Pierre "These overtly sexual figures are portrayed in postures that would seem obscene, were it not for their austere facial expressions that express the gravity of performing a sacred act" ('Art and Shamanism in the Himalayas' on website titled [tribalarts_com.htm](http://tribalarts.com.htm)). In this context it needs to be mentioned that rock art in India as well as other parts of the world contain plenty of material suggesting sexual activities, which can definitely be related to shamanistic practices as seen in case of Himalayan tribal art.

Broadly, shamans in Nepal are called 'Jhankri', however in the west the term 'Dhami' is used and 'Bijuwa' in the east. One of the indispensable accessories in possession of a 'Jhankri' is the dhyangro (drum). Small metal objects like a knife, trident or star, are sometimes hooked on to the drum. The drum and the drumstick ('dhyangro' and 'gajo') are both the shaman's weapons and his steed. Shamans in the west of Nepal do not use drums themselves, but since music is essential for the trance, therefore musical accompaniment is provided by a separate musician (lower caste) called 'Damai'. In the

east of Nepal the 'Bijuwa' plays a brass dish. Music and dance is yet another common factor noticed in rock art all over the world. Other objects used by Nepalese shamans include the ritual vase (bumba), trident (trisul) that is the symbol of the god Shiva, a bronze mirror, and a headdress of porcupine quills. The shaman's dress, regarded as the god's garment, is supposed to make him invulnerable to attacks from evil spirits. The Jhankri or Bijuwa wears a white shirt and a long white skirt symbolizing purity, and various protective necklaces. Necklaces made of shiny black seeds (rittha) 'rudraksha' (Elaeocarpus seeds) are supposed to be strung according to a magically prescribed number, either 54 or 108. Necklaces made from the vertebrae of a snake sacrificed by the shaman for ritual purpose are also used. Small bronze bells, sometimes of ancient Chinese origin, tinkle on the shaman's chest to the rhythm of the dance or trance, frightening away the spirits ('Art and Shamanism in the Himalayas' on tribalarts_com.htm). We also see elongated bronze figures are made for funeral rites. Interesting point to note is that these figurines are usually depicted in motion, either on horse back or walking. Even if it is in a sitting posture, it is in prayer as if for a journey towards eternity.

Himalayan mask tradition is drawn from the diverse traditions of shamanism, village myths and the classical traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism. Of the many varieties of masks available some of the Buddhist masks were known to be used in the mysterious dance known in Tibet as 'Cham', in which protector deities are invoked and negative forces are dispersed (Chazot 1988). Masks serve as one of the tools used by a shaman. In order to operate on a higher plane, the shaman must fully identify with the powers which he hopes to wield. Masks are one of the empowering mediums by which the shaman 'becomes' the spirit which he invites to possess him. Shamanic masks are made mostly in Nepal by the 'Magar' and 'Gurung' tribes.

2.7 TRIBAL ART OF INDIA

We need to have a look at the tribal art of India and search for any clue which can probably throw some light on rock art interpretation. Contemporary tribal communities have a great variety and complexity in their religious beliefs and practices. However it must be borne in mind that these tribal groups, in spite of retaining their religio-cultural patterns, have got absorbed and assimilated with the rural populations. In addition to their own rituals and beliefs, they worship Hindu deities and speak the dialects of the areas inhabited by them (Aryan 1994, 7). However it is interesting to note that magico-religious beliefs still play a prominent role in their lives. All calamities, diseases and even death are attributed to malevolent spirits which are propitiated for protection and help. Thus religion plays a major role in their lives which in turn is expressed through art and put to use in their crafts. Tribal art is generally ritualistic and enmeshed in the consciousness of the tribe and changes according to the developments in the tribe

Interesting point to note here is that some motifs seen in tribal art are suggestive of themes found in rock art. For example during my visit to Miapur village (nearest locality to Bhimbetka rock shelters) which was on the 11th day after Diwali (the famous festival of lights usually held in the month of November, in India), I noticed several homes with five hand prints (Fig 2.3) and a crescent moon made on the main entrance of the house along with colourful designs comprising of geometric patterns were made on the floor. These are usually considered to be auspicious.



Fig 2.3 (Photo by author)

Handprints have also been found in many rock art sites, which have been separately discussed under ‘Human Figures’ section in the thesis (Like, hand prints found in rock shelter III at Bhimbetka is also seen in tribal homes, see figs-3d.39, 3d.40). However we must remember that even if certain themes and techniques might seem common between rock art and tribal art, it should not be given a similar meaning for it ‘may well be the results of different behavioral process in the past and present’ (Chakravarty & Bednarik 1997:87).



Fig 2.4 (Photo by author)



Fig 2.5 (Photo by author)

Many common traits with rock art can still be seen in present day tribal art which is very fascinating for us. Though these cannot provide us with the meanings or the technical details involved in making of rock art, but it can definitely offer graphic examples of motifs and designs being made to mark rituals and festivals within India.

The following pictures display art made by locals at Miapur village, at Bhimbetka.



Fig 2.6 Animal motifs are being made on the wall of houses (Photo by author)



Fig 2.7 Plants, animals and birds (Photo by author)



Fig 2.8 Elephant figure

(Photo by author)



Fig 2.9 A human figure along with an animal figure (Photo by author)

(The following information about Indian tribes is obtained mainly from website titled, Tribal religions of India.htm). The Bhils are one of the largest tribes of western India, living in parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Though many Bhils are Hinduised still they hold on to the belief that miseries are perpetrated on living things by evil spirits and unsatisfied souls. This dread has led them to raise memorial stones as well as metal icons cast in the memory of their clan ancestors. These icons usually in the form of bronze figurines of horse riders are thought to be the symbolic vehicles of the deceased's soul to heaven. Elaborate rituals are performed for their worship as well as appeasement of the souls known as the 'nukta' rites or the 'mossar' (Aryan 1994, 15).

The **Bhils** and **Bhilala** tribes of Madhya Pradesh as well as **Rathwa** community of Chotaudepur in Gujarat paint myths related to creation called **Pithora** paintings. Horses, elephants, tigers, birds, gods, men and objects of daily life are painted in multicoloured hues. Auspicious wall paintings of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh 'mandanas' are meant to welcome Gods into the house. Mud and cowdung are usually plastered on the walls which are then painted white. The women of the house paint swastika symbols along with the sun or the tree of life in black or red over it. Auspicious diagrams are drawn on the floor with rice paste, coloured powder, flower petals or grains of rice, often with symbolic motifs set within floral and geometric patterns.

Another form of tribal art is called **Madhubani** which is traditionally painted on walls and floors by the women of Bihar to invoke divine protection. Scenes from Hindu epics, fertility symbols, auspicious birds and beasts are daubed on walls with the paste of newly harvested rice. One more form of tribal painting from Maharashtra is called **Warli** paintings. They are made with white paint (originally with rice paste) on mud walls, and are pretty close to prehistoric rock paintings in execution and usually depict sowing and harvesting scenes.

The **Naga** tribes live in the mountains of north-east India. They believe in an earthquake God who has created the earth. Other deities without name or form live in the mountains,

forests, rivers, and lakes, who need to be pacified as they are hostile to men. They also believe in omens, dreams and witchcraft and some men are believed to be able to turn into tigers. Some groups sacrifice a dog or pig when making a wood carving, otherwise the carver will become ill or die. Head-hunting which is also found in rock art of Panchmarhi (Dubey 1992) (features later in the thesis) was an important practice for the Nagas, for they believed that fertile crops depended on the sprinkling of blood from a stranger over the fields. However this practice ceased to exist by late 19th and early 20th centuries. The ritual dance is a very important tradition for the Nagas. Woven designs are mainly geometric with a limited colour range. All objects of art including costumes and ornaments are not only for aesthetic effects but possess power and each ornament is restricted to certain groups. The same object can be used on different occasions depending on the tribe, particularly male status insignia. After head-hunting stopped wood-carving of heads (or brass versions from Hindus) was made; this symbolized bravery and status for the men. Carvings on the morung are for prestige and power, and include warriors, dancing couples, powerful animals, and fantastic creatures such as a tiger with two heads. Erotic as well as buffalo motifs symbolized fertility and wealth respectively.

Also amongst the **Todas**, a pastoral community in the Nilgiris hills of south India there is a practice of wearing gold pendants which has magical powers, one being in the form of a stylized buffalo mask with plant motif at the back. Interestingly Toda religion is based on the buffaloes and their milk. The dairies serve as temples for them.

Khovar and **Sohrai** art belonging to tribes from densely forested parts of south Bihar plateau is a pair of essentially matriarchal art forms linked with the seasonal cycles and implicit with the feminine symbols, sexuality, and fertility. These artistic ritual traditions are carried through generations and made by married women, called 'devis' during the marriage and harvesting seasons. 'Devis' pass on their knowledge of sacred icons to their daughters who take these forms with them when they get married and go to their husbands homes. (Understanding the evolution and dissemination of these sacred art

forms is only possible for a senior 'Devi' of the tribe, therefore there lies scope of further research in this direction). Interestingly there are rock art sites in the jungles of Hazaribag.

Finally in a quest to see if some portions of Indian rock art have their origins in an altered state of consciousness, recorded shamanism within India must be considered. To my amazement I found that most of the present day tribal communities in India still have shamans who take care of the tribe by warding of evil spirits. As has already been mentioned in the earlier section that the rural folk of Rajasthan are staunch believers of blackmagic, witchcraft, and the miseries perpetrated on the living beings by the unsatisfied souls of the dead, and by evil spirits (Aryan 1994, 15). The Bhils call their shaman 'Bhopa'. Besides these examples there are plenty of instances from India where shamanism is seen as a very common practice in religious and tribal rituals. For example the 'chadak puja' celebrated on both sides of Bengal-Orissa (eastern India) border. During this festival ecstatic dances are performed all through the holy celebrations with the accompaniment of musicians and itinerant drummers. Dances and songs alternate with self mortification practices such as piercing different parts of one's own body, walking over thorny bushes, or lying on a plank studded with nails (Das K.B 1953, 67-68). Infact self torture rites, is practiced within shamanistic cults and was regarded by many tribal societies of the past as a test of an individual by supernatural powers (Brighenti 2001). Among the Bhil communities settled in western Madhya Pradesh there is an annual ceremony of initiation to shaman hood on the occasion of which the young initiates climbs a bamboo pole in a state of trance after performing self-injury acts such as fire tests and flagellation. The pole probably represents 'Bhavani Mata', a form of Hindu Great Goddess by which the apprentice shaman are believed to be possessed in the course of the ceremony (Rahmann R 1959: 739,747). Trance and possession are common phenomena in Shakta fire walking rites (Brighenti 2001, 344). Among the Muria Gonds, a Dravidian-speaking tribal group of Bastar district, there is a type of shaman-diviner, called 'siraha' who is believed to be able to establish a contact with the spirits of diseases through ecstatic dances, convulsions, trance and self-torture acts such as self-scourging

and swinging on a swing whose seat is provided with sharp points (Elwin 1947, 199). The same paraphernalia are peculiar, to the Baiga shaman known as Barua (Elwin 1939).

Therefore we can see that shamanism has been in practice worldwide as a part of ancient rituals. Shamans have used dissociation and other experiences of altered states of consciousness, facilitated by supernatural entities to achieve some ends. In this connection we must remember that any form of art has the capacity to create illusion and to display the unseen/unknown before our eyes. These miraculous, magical qualities have led all spiritual traditions to employ the magic of the arts in one way or another. The rest of this thesis will try and see this connection.