

Elephas Maximus in Rock Art of Kerala, India

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Introduction

The state of Kerala lies between north latitudes 8°04' and 12°44' and east longitudes 74°54' and 77°12' is located in the southwestern part of India. This narrow state is surrounded by Arabian Sea on the west and states like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka on the eastern and northern parts. The state is stretching approximately 580 km coastline from south to north and there are forty-four rivers as the major source of water. The climate is characterized by excessive rainfall and hot summer season and the area is covered with abundant natural formations like thick forests in the high ranges or hills, rough laterite midlands and narrow coastal plains. In its high lands, one comes across a few naturally formed rock shelters and caves that were converted to a gallery of pictures and engravings by the people of the departed era.

Art is a worldwide phenomenon and it is a part of a behavioral system of ancient human beings. Rock art refers to a large and varied corpus of paintings (petrographs) and engravings (petroglyphs) on the walls, ceilings, and floors of the caves and rock shelters. Rock art reported from Kerala also has some regional traditions from different parts of the country. Both petrographs and petroglyphs can be seen in the state with a variety of themes. Rock art tradition in Kerala starts from prehistoric period to the historic period.

Rock art research in Kerala begins with the report of famous petroglyph site Edakkal, Wayanadu district by Fred Fawcett (1901), this discovery was the outcome of colonial period. Fawcett was shown interest in studying prehistory and ethnography of the area. After Fawcett's discovery of Edakkal, a long gap in archaeological research until 1970's in Kerala. In 1974, S.P. Thampi made some discoveries; they are Ezhuthala, Attala and Kulukkala sites in the Maraiyur region of Idukki district (Thampi 1974 and 1984; Darsana 2011; Kurian 2011). Later on, many discoveries were done in the region by a number of persons and they brought to light many sites. Other petroglyph sites reported in the same period are from Tenmalai, Kollam district (Rajendran 1985) and Pandavanpara at Ancode in Thiruvananthapuram district (Gurukkal and Varrier 1999). In the 1990s students from Calicut University made some new discoveries in Ettukudukka, a petroglyph site in Kannur district. In the mean time some sporadic reportings were made in Palakkad district by V Sanalkumar (2014), but not many details of the rock art and sites were known to the academic arena.

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Elephas maximus in Rock Art

It is clear that animals were depicted universally in the rock art and accounted for many cultural factors. Obviously, similarity between animals in art keeping away the boundaries of space. These arts are widely separated and divergent cultures suggest that the influences of more prevailing factors are reasonable. Compared to this, animals can potentially be portrayed in a numerous of ways but were depicted in a relatively stereotyped fashion over long periods throughout the world. Several factors can be explained for the depictions of animals in the rock art. They may be regarded as a part of evolutionary factors in general or in cognitive development of human beings. In some paintings in Europe, depictions portrayed reveal a keen observation of natural fauna and they are depicted it naturally.

Animals are admired as for their physical abilities, superior in many ways to those of the human beings. Elephants have a deep rooted influence over humans as its superior quality of physical abilities from the hunter-gatherer environment onwards. Elephants are depicted with different poses in the rock art; they are in the poses of ears up, trunk and tail extended, raises trunk and ears as angry and also charging pose. The trunk may also raised in greeting to an approaching elephant or simply to sniff the air (Pearce, 2009).

Elephas Depiction in Rock Art of Kerala

Attala

The site lies in the border of Munnar and Marayoor village in the uphill and west of Pallanadu village. The shelter is facing towards the east. Attala is local name, which means 'shelter for goats', where goats and Nilgiri Thar were represented and locally seen in the region (Kurain 2011). The shelter having almost 100 individual painting executed in white kaolin. The depictions are on the central portion of the shelter; there are three motifs of men riding elephants, variety of animals, human figures, band fighting, rituals, plant, food gathering, anthropomorphic figures, signs, weapons etc (Mathpal 1998 & Thampi 1976, 1984).



fig. 1 Man riding an elephant along with some unidentified animals



fig. 2 Elephant rider and probably lizard / crocodile (?)

Edakkal Rock Shelter



fig. 3 Elephant and human forms with raised hands

Edakkal rock shelter is the most unique and earliest rock art site discovered in Kerala and depictions are in the form of engravings or etching. Edakkal shelter is located in the Ambukuthi hill close to Sultan Battery in Ambalavayal taluk of Wayanadu district. The shelter is having a lower and upper chamber; lower part does not have any engravings but a perennial water stream flows to down. The upper storey is reached after a steep climb that opens to plain landing and to the right of it is an opening leading into a cleft between two rock formations. The rock surface on either side of the entrance is engraved or etched with strange looking stylized anthropomorphic figures, animals and other symbolic representations. The left wall almost in the center has a very prominent anthropomorphic figure with a strange face, headgear and arms. There are many more stylized anthropomorphic figures adjoining these with some small and some large. There are depictions of animals like dog, elephant, deer/blackbuck, peacock and plant and flowers, a human figure with a hand shaped like a jar etc. A ‘wheeled cart’ with a figure above on the extreme left and a lady with a square headed dead dress on the right end are interesting representations (Kumar 2014). The large anthropomorphic representations towards the center are apparently the pivotal icon as all other figures animal and human seem to be orientated towards it or placed auxiliary to it.

Ezhuthala

Ezhuthala is situated near Maraiyoor town in Koodakkad area of Maraiyoor forest area, Idukki district. The paintings are seen in red and white pigments. However, other pigments like grey, saffron and black are also seen. Superimposed paintings can be seen of bull, bison, horse, seated saint like human figures with arms raised, elephants with and without riders, symbols, ritual dance scenes and ceremonies etc. (Thampi 1976 & Das 2014). The painting of the elephant in the upper panel seems old and faint.

Ezhuthalamadi

The rock art site Ezhuthalamadi is located six hours walking distance from the village Kodanthoorkudi. One can see warriors riding on elephants with weapons in white pigment.



fig. 4 Elephants with rider

Kodanthoorkudi

The village Kodanthoorkudi is located in the north bank of river Chinnar in Tamil Nadu and near to Churulipatty village in the south bank of the river Chinnar in Kerala. A petroglyph of an elephant inside the village was engraved on the bedrock in the middle of the village.



fig. 5 Engraving of an elephant

Analysis and conclusion

The concept of socially extended thoughts and minds are interpreted as human's development in its cognitive abilities. Cognitive abilities are productive in the arena tools and technological advances in the prehistoric peoples. These changes can be seen in the implementation of rock art too. Rock paintings in the Marayoor area express a vibrant reality of human-animal-nature relation in the past. Rock art in the region clearly shows the absence of wild elephant in the painting. All the elephants depicted in the area are domesticated; they are shown with a rider (Kurian 2011).

Anamalai is a hill in the region named due to its abundance of elephants. Though the entire paintings of Great Migration Corridor-GMC (Kurian 2011 & 2014) are inside forest and wildlife zone, and elephant reserve of Anamalai hills, depictions of wild elephants are few in the paintings. During Sangam Age (Tamil Classical Age), Anamalais was a famous hunting ground of elephants for tusk. It is believed that wild elephants started to come to this valley less than a century before. There is an interesting story among the tribes about the arrival of a wild elephant to the valley. At the same time they have a story that few places of this area were used for trapping wild elephants long time ago and the area was called 'Anaikoppam'. So between the time of story of the trapping of elephant and arrival

of elephant has to be studied in detail. The themes depicted in the rock art will help to understand the socio-cultural aspects of the people. A few ideas and meanings can be discerned through the study and analysis of themes represented in the rock art. These themes vary from space and time. Along with rock art in the Maraiyoor region, many Megalithic monuments as well as archaeological remains were noticed.

Conservation Status

Most of the rock art sites are now in an endangered condition due to human encroachments, surface quarrying, human vandalism and weathering process. Most of the paintings have faded due to high exposure to the rain and sunlight caused high deterioration. If enough conservation strategies are not urgently initiated, rock art culture may be completely destroyed forever.

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