



EVOLVING PRELITERATE ART AS A COMMUNICATION SYSTEM: EVIDENCES FROM INDIA IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract - Evolving preliterate art as a communication system: evidences from India in global perspective

Preliterate art, in its nascent form had emerged during penultimate phase of Pleistocene period and later it continued in successive periods among pre-urban societies that survive even contemporarily. Therefore, the rock art of prehistoric past and tribal art of contemporary periods chronologically rests on two polar ends of a same tradition. The rationale or conceptual model on cultural continuum support in developing a technique for experimentation on ethnographic analogy. Preliterate art, both of past and present forms is marked with certain common features as well as regional and periodic characteristics. In India, particularly in central part, naturalistic images mostly portray in painted scenes. There, thematic narratives are common. Whereas, in its easternmost borderline repetitive, abstract form of non - figurative motifs, mostly signs and symbols are frequent. In rock art imagery, food collecting stage is succeeded by pastorals. The economy of settled cultivators is rarely represented directly in the rock art imagery of entire central India. In final sequence, battle scenes depicting inter-ethnic or intra-ethnic rivalry, struggle and conflict became an obsession to the artists. During early historic era several generations had either witnessed or evidently shared such brutal experiences through their oral tradition and art. A comparative assessment between the early rock art and its analogous forms among practicing preliterate societies signify new dimensions for indigenous interpretation of rock art valid in both synchronic and diachronic dimensions.

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Study of rock art is primarily an area for an integrated and multi-disciplinary approach and the focal point is the quest for retrieval of early rock art and unveiling all possible aspects of human activities, ingenuity and modifications developed as an adaptive mechanism.

To a researcher in the field of rock art, the basic area for decipherment of rock art is not limited to explaining the visual narratives, but the approach is expected to be more liberal for understanding all possible interrelated areas to reconstruct the overall cultural configuration of the community. Economy, social organization, world view and value system, environment and cultural ecology, technological manifestations, folklore and religion all may have direct or indirect relations with art. Such integrated social network of art activities is evident in the ethnographic accounts available from all parts of the world (Firth, 1951; 1992; Boas, 1955; Fischer, 1961).

The incident and purpose for communication of ideas or transmission of messages through creation of rock art could be ascertained from studying certain norms and practices followed unconsciously during its creation or in its process of manufacture. For such analytical assessment, the selecting criteria for the rock canvas within a site are to be recorded meticulously. In central India, majority of the rock art imagery are located on the naturally available surface of the rock wall in rock shelters, rather than within the inner walls of the caves. The majority of the art imagery, mostly paintings was drawn on open spaces with some rocky covering on the top, as also where maximum daylight is available. In addition to those criteria, majority of paintings are entirely visible from outside entrance part. Whereas, presence of images in inaccessible parts of the natural rock shelters, or in narrow crevices of the rock surfaces are relatively limited in number or totally absent in majority cases. Maximum numbers of paintings are concentrated at a height of eye – levels of an adult visitor remain standing on the floor of any rock shelter. In addition to that selected numbers of images are drawn on the ceiling which could be visible on the top of the head of the visitor only by raising or bending head upwards by a visitor within the painted gallery. In a number of rock shelters, elaborate paintings were drawn on narrow space of the ceilings close to the floors. In such areas the painted panels could only be visible either sitting position or only by laying on floor and keeping the eyes upwards to trace the painted panels above. Therefore, it may be inferred from the different mode of execution in making art that the images are arranged in open space and visible from outside or from the entrance of the rock shelters reveal that the paintings were prepared with an intention and target so that its anticipated viewers could easily find the painted panels to appreciate, read or follow its meaningful message-content. Furthermore, it also reveals that the sites containing paintings and engravings within rock shelters and caves has open rocky spaces like boulders and bed rocks in its close proximity. But such open rocks do not show any sign of engraving. On the contrary, sites where the open rocks contain marks of art activities do not have any natural caves or shelter – like formation in the locality. Such basic prerequisite for art activities identify that mostly such work was created with an intention to preserve. If the motive for preservation had not acted in the artist's mind, then they could have equally explored and executed on adjoining open air boulders and bed rocks as an extension of art activities. But their work was restricted only within a rather protected space under a roof for obvious reason for safeguarding such creations. In such sites where engravings and brushings are only found on open air boulders, essentially the topographic region is without any traces of caves and rock shelters. In such areas, the art – makers had no alternative and better option to preserve their work within limited natural resources.

Two most common features is marked in rock art, not only in central India but it may be a universal phenomenon. The first of which is – before painting, the natural rock surface was not artificially prepared by application of a base colour or otherwise. The second relatively common phenomenon is – superimposition of paintings. Such incidence is more common in centrally located spaces where natural light is more available and usually attract the viewers' attention more than in remote or dark corners. Such types of analytical approaches need a thorough scrutiny on all rock shelters and caves within a cluster of sites. Study on selection criteria for space on rock has direct relation with seasonal changes of light condition and its direction with varying local climate and other range of factors. Before preparing technical details for developing a suitable methodology for study on selection criteria, a lesson from the ethnological parallels could be more appropriate for understanding its pattern of usage in contemporary but comparable primordial societies (Chakraverty, 1999). The usual views for rock art representations are profile views for images of both human and animal figures whereas the front or fronto – lateral views are less common. But bodies shown from above or from below are rarely represented. Such conscious or spontaneous attempt by painter to portray a

particular figurative view possibly inspired or influenced by the view which is normally observed visually by an individual without any distortion. The profile views require less technical skill to portray a figure than other views.

The angle of vision for the best viewing of a image placed on a rock surface, locating the direction of the figure following its base line is essential. Whether the particular placement of the imagery is in hidden crevice or in open and easily visible niche – such occurrences support the deductive logic for understanding the inherent role of rock art. In central Indian sites, paintings are concentrated in such locations where the possibility and chances for its natural protection from rain and wind are more. In rock art, at least in Central Indian rock shelters, each of the illustrations are either with a single motif or in combinations of several different types connected with a same central theme or episode (Mathpal, 1984; Neumayer,1983, 1993; Wakankar & Brooks, 1976). But each of the individual clusters of imagery is separated from others mostly by an interval of open space. Often such figures are superimposed when painted in successive period of time occupying the same space in different time period and using different colour, technique, treatment of arrangement etc. But in the entire region, use of distinct borderline to separate each composition is never found. But in mid-eastern region, comprising the states of Jharkhand and Orissa, in certain instances, figurative and non-figurative motifs are bounded by clear-cut boundary lines. Such arrangement of rock art imagery within a discrete frame or outline mark a later qualitative advancement in communicating their visual narratives. Such patterns of enclosed figures illustrate mostly abstract sign and symbols appeared repeatedly. Similar arrangements of enclosures are common among tribal murals and ritual paintings among Lanjhia Saoras of Orissa, Rathvas and Warlis in Western India (Chakraverty, 2009).

In tribal art, particularly in art practices among thirteen different tribal societies in parts of India, some relevant observations (Chakraverty, 2009) may be mentioned. The analysis is for understanding the selection criteria of spaces for similar art activities in prehistoric art. The tribal wall paintings, more common among Lanjhia Saoras of Orissa (Fig:20), Rathvas (Fig:19) and Warlis in Western India (Fig:18), paintings are ritualistic drawings depicting the sacred seats of a series of deities, departed ancestors and their soul, myths of creation, icons and their praises to fulfill their aspirations in mortal life. Such murals, in maximum number of households are painted within the rooms and usually not visible from outside courtyards. Among Saora tribe, such icons are protected in dark areas and covered by hanging seeds, pots containing water, weaponries etc. The Saora icons are secret visual narratives and prayers to their propitiating deities that are strictly maintained only by the family members. All outsiders, including the neighbours are not allowed to locate the exact deity. The idea behind such practices is that- if any evil force from outsiders could identify the deity, then they may divert the deity which may ultimately be harmful for the family. Therefore, for painting of a covert icon for magico-religious purposes, the inner walls of rooms are selected and its protective coverings are most essential. On the contrary, among Santals, a numerically dominant tribe in eastern India, wall paintings, mostly decorative motifs are more commonly found on outside walls of their huts signifying their prosperity, wealth and happiness that they prepare or renovate during their annual autumn festival. Traditional Santal society, maintain several customs and taboos related to witchcraft and sorcery. But wall paintings have no immediate connection with such magico-religious practices (Chakraverty, 1987). Therefore, their art is more communicative and open to all section of viewers. In addition to that, Santal art practices sometimes visually narrate their symbols of tribal identity, myths of creation, glorious past and historical episodes of their battle for freedom against forces of British imperial army (Fig: 25). It is also relevant to ascertain that in tribal sacred groves in India, terracotta or metal votive figurines are placed as offerings after fulfillment of expectations and hope. The figure of horses and elephants are more common votive figurines present throughout the entire length and breadth of India. Uniqueness of such village sacred grove is that a particular type of figure is repetitively found in cluster within a limited space where the range of variation of form is least. Sometimes, in rock art sites, such overwhelming presence of particular type of figure within a distinct locality or region is not rare.

One such example on contemporary votive figurines and its link with early rock art exists in Kathotia Karad rock shelters (Fig: 11&14) near Bhopal, the capital of the state of Madhya Pradesh in central India. In Kathotia Karad site, more than ten rock shelters have extensive painted galleries. In the same site, a particular rock shelter is considered as the abode of a tribal deity which is believed to cure pains and other various ailments of both hands and legs. The local tribal villagers for such diseases pray in this shrine for mystic cure. On fulfillment of such wishes, they again visit to that



shrine and then offer a pair of life-size wooden replica of both hands and legs (Fig: 11) with other essentials and perform a ritual with the help of tribal shaman or priest. In that particular site, dominant numbers of rock art imagery illustrate horse riding warriors and battle scenes. During combats in battles, the possibility for loosing hand and legs or even death is usual. From such trauma of battle as reflected in rock art, mythical realities had emerged which till act as well as encroaches the mind and belief of indigenous preliterate population. The tribal communities encounter the visual messages from the rock art most frequently and repeatedly during regular collection of forest products which is also a substantial source for their sustenance. In this event, the narrative elements of folklore depicted in rock art motivate and transmitted through generations as living tradition which is not lost in the passage of time and events. It is relevant to mention that the reports on empirical studies of contemporary forager and hunter – gatherers in global context reveals that among hunter – gatherers, for organized group hunting, a distinct strategy, experienced leadership and training is essential. In addition to that, the keen observation on behaviour of the targeted animal group, their breeding season and sensitive striking points on body all such information is shared by the matured members of the hunting expedition in their informal group meetings, folklore and related supernatural performances that stimulate the team in preparing prior to their expeditions. In earliest phase of Pleistocene rock art preponderance of zoomorphs is almost a universal phenomenon. Such situation is also evident in central India. In central Indian sites, wild animals are portrayed in visual imagery in isolation. Among tribal hunters, it is customary to mark a particular area with success in availability of suitable hunt. Hunters, identify a particular area with availability of certain wild species. The hunter – foragers store such information in their collective memory through oral tradition. Such indigenous knowledge is shared and inherited by the tribal community for competence in sustenance. Rock art demonstrate an identical system for maintenance of a non – verbal and visually transmitted arrangement for communication within a generation and even beyond that time limit. Rock art acted as a unique indigenous knowledge resource for better sustenance in the forest habitat even valid to their successive generations. Hunting – gathering activity do not necessarily mark the presence of Palaeolithic or Mesolithic period. Foraging had continued as an alternative source for livelihood during crisis. Such activity is still valid among marginally located tribal communities. Hunting is also a popular sports and annual ritual for initiation of youths is still being practiced by several tribal groups in central India. Chrono-culturally, the next stage demonstrates wild animals in association with anthropomorphs, primarily as hunter, either individual or organized in groups (Fig: 1,2&3). Such activities give some clue for successful mode of technique adopted by the group. Visual narratives depict urge for sharing of experiences (Fig:1) and anecdote for each expedition. To early preliterate societies, rock art was a system of virtual data – repository created and developed by successive generations for the benefit of themselves as well as to their successors. In rock art of central India, a distinct but overlapped phase is marked by the presence of pastorals in rock art (Fig: 7). With display of essential activities for animal domestication, providing suitable security to domesticates against threats indicate the major issues for concern for their community. As it is revealed from the images, the threat from wild carnivores was in initial period. The pastoralists had to remain prepared to combat attacks from other rival groups, particularly of plunderers who raided on their herd. Such periodic insecurity and conflict, both seems to be the prime motivating factors for creation of rock art. In rock art of early historic period, descriptive accounts of various battle scenes, mostly feud (Fig:5& 6) had influenced the artists. Rather, such theme or view had turned to an obsession affecting the mental imagery of its creators (Chakraverty, 2003). Sometimes, intimate visual records in association of more realistic contextual assemblages convincingly support the view that possibly the painters had witnessed such conflict and genocide (Fig:5& 6) by themselves directly. No distortion of tool and weapons are observed in art compositions illustrating such battle-scenes. Use of wheel and chariots are illustrated (Fig: 4) signifying organized effort by urban influences. The ultimate or final stage of rock art display well articulated scripts like ‘Sankh – lipi’ or conch shell variety and early ‘Brahmi’ scripts sometimes found superimposed over layers of earlier figurative paintings. But in Indian context no evidence is reported for evolving a proto-script from its ancestral rock art imagery.

Some particular examples may be cited in support of communicative role of early rock art. In central India Bhimbetka and several other rock art sites display hand prints (Fig: 8&9) . Sometimes, hand stencils and engraved figures of hands are also common. Identical situation is observed in tribal households of Gond – speaking tribes in central India where such marks signify its associated

rituals to protect the household (Fig:10) from harmful effects of witchcraft and malevolent sorcery. Hand prints of various colours are marked on body of all domesticates during their autumn festivities. Generally, in tribal households, such hand prints are common in the spaces for entrance in rooms or to the courtyard. In rock shelters, hand prints are more concentrated to a corner or close to turning space or in entry points. But hand prints are available in selected areas only. In a rock art site of south Goa, (Chakraverty, 2003) deeply incised engravings on lateritic bed rock are arranged on the bank of a narrow stream (Fig:12 & 13). There, figure of several pair of feet are engraved (Fig: 12) close to the edges of the water level. Presence of such pair of feet directed towards the bank indicates the easy route to climb from the river bed after a holy dip in it. In the same site, an incised figure of a large labyrinth is placed close to the riverbed where another pair of foot marks is indicating the route to step into the labyrinth after taking bath in the stream (Fig:13). The local indigenous population of the site identifies the labyrinth symbolizing a rigorous ritual activity connected with local folklore.

In rock art sites of Sambalpur district, Orissa sometimes the figures of snakes are drawn beside holes and crevices which seems to have been used by its makers as warning against possible dangers that they have experienced. In Edkaal Cave of Wynaad district of Kerala, a particular cave on the top of a hill has complex linear forms of engravings all around its walls. Such engravings (Fawcett, 1901) have smooth linear markings possibly created by rubbing (Fig: 15). The linear marks are overlapped and from its complex networks from which anthropomorphs and other figurative and non-figurative symbols could be discerned (Fig: 15). It is significant that excepting that particular cave no other evidence of rock art is found in that region.

In Jharkhand and in entire southern peninsular part of India, rock art is considered as connected to the megalithic practices during Iron Age. In Jharkhand (Chakraverty,2003) anthropomorphs are engraved on open bed rock and boulders where the human figures are shown as buried within stone circles. One such rock painting more clearly illustrates the ritual of burial in greater detail (Fig:17). Burial practices are also common among Mundari – speaking tribes of Chhotanagpur region in Jharkhand. Large memorial stones are erected after their funerary practices. Among Khasi and Garo – two matriarchal tribal communities of Meghalaya in the North – East of India burial practices are common. The outer surface of the stone pots and jars which contain the charred bones of the deceased have engraved figures (Fig: 16) of animals and human beings (Mills, 1929). The Korku tribe living in the Hoshangabad and Betul districts of Madhya Pradesh largely practice wood carvings (Fig: 23) that are in the form of funerary pillars locally known as ‘gatha’. Thus Korku art is largely ritualistic and related to magico-religious belief. It is also connected with the concept of after life and transmigration of soul. The art also reflect the tribal way of belief in the concepts of ‘Karma’ or deeds and misdeed, rebirth and hierarchy existing in the Korku society (Chakraverty, 1999; 2009).

One of the most common features of rock art is that – the human figures are drawn in silhouette without any individual identity. So that their facial details like eyes, nose, lips etc. are usually not added. It may either for absence of such skill known to the artists or they had purposefully avoided the identity of any person to demonstrate the person as of any member of the society. In particular compositions only the gender-specific identity or relative age is revealed. It is most probable that the facial detail of any individual to recognize was not at all required to portray a human being. Identity of an individual was primarily as a part of the society. Such universal view, at least in initial level was followed in the entire rock art imagery.

In tribal art of India, the tradition of wall paintings and murals has some technical similarities with rock art. In both traditions, the above noted societal identity of individuals is common. But in tribal metal art, wood carvings and other sculptures, human faces are more realistic. It is significant to reveal from the ethnographic accounts that tribal art is mostly purposive and visual art is primarily to communicate the ideas, belief and norms recognized by the society. In tribal art, individual creativity of an artist, appreciation to its aesthetic quality is secondary. Even behind every decorative work, some urge to exhibit wealth, prosperity and other associated social norm and practices are followed. In initial level, tribal art is a collective expression of the society represented by an individual or group of performer who voluntarily undertake such responsibility through mostly spontaneous efforts. In later period, when matured, tribal artists gradually get suitable clients, either within their own society or beyond it. Then art turns to a craft tradition when it is adopted as profession and a source for sustenance. The communicative role of rock art in a preliterate society during the past is apparent and its ethnographic analogies further justify such view valid even in contemporary situation. In central Indian plateau region, naturalistic representations predominant in rock art directly illu-



strate the content of visual mode of communication without use of any abbreviated symbols. Whereas, in eastern India, at least in Jharkhand and in northern parts of Orissa, maximum presence of signs and symbols. Its repeated use indicates that in this region, a common understandable and standardized form of visual code had evolved among the communities. Abstraction of naturalistic forms and its symbolic use indicate a metaphorical role of art in communication within a preliterate society.

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A comprehensive Account on Rock Art of India				
Region	States	Nature of Rock Art sites	Type of art	Art composition & period
 <p>Northern Region</p>	Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal	Mostly open air sites on boulders and bed rock.	Maximum engravings.	More separate / individual non-related figures. Simple stick figures etc. Mesolithic, Neolithic to later historic period, Buddhist influence.
 <p>Central & Western Region</p>	Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Rajasthan, Gujrat, Maharashtra	Mostly rock shelters, few caves.	Paintings are dominant. Engravings are rare.	Individual figures & large compositions, visual narratives. Both rudimentary & intricate, skilled evolved forms. Rock art is related to upper palaeolithic, mesolithic, chalcolithic to early historic period.
 <p>Eastern Region</p>	Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Assam & Manipur	Rock shelters & open air boulders, bed rock.	More engravings, few paintings, and also painted engravings.	Maximum presence of signs & symbols, abstract forms. Realistic or naturalistic figures are also frequent. Rock art could be related to the manufacture of microliths, chalcolithic assemblages to later historic period.
 <p>Southern Region</p>	Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Assam & Manipur, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu & Goa	Rock shelters, open air boulders, bed rock & few caves.	Both paintings, engravings & brushings.	Individual figurines are more frequent, visual narratives are few. Rock art is mostly related to Megalithic practices and iron age assemblages.



Fig : 1 Group hunting, Site : Lakhajore, near Bhimbetka. Central India.



Fig : 2 Hunting scene, Site : Chaturbhujnath Nala, M.P.

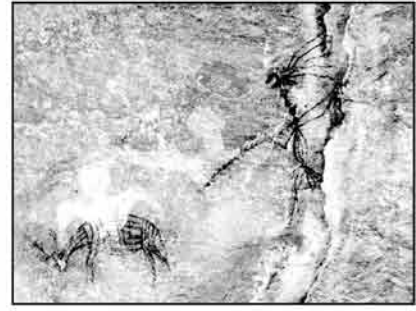


Fig : 3 Hunting by using harpoon, Lakhajore.



Fig : 4 Use of chariot, Site : Chaturbhujnath Nala, M.P.



Fig : 5. Head hunting during battle, Site : Pachmarhi, M.P.



Fig : 6 Scene showing organised form of battle, Site : Bhimbetka, M.P.



Fig : 7 Domestication of animals Site : Pachmarhi, M.P.



Fig : 8 Engraved figure of a hand
Site : Sambalpur, Orissa.



Fig : 9 Hand prints, Site : Bhimbetka, M.P.



Fig : 10 Hand prints on wall of
a Gond tribal household
near Bhimbetka.



Fig : 11 Wooden votive figurines.
Kathotia Karad, near Bhopal



Fig : 12 Large engravings of
feet, Site : Goa



Fig : 13 Large engravings of a labyrinth
Site : Goa



Fig : 14 Painted battle scene, Site : Kathotia Karad
Near Bhopal.



Fig : 15 Engraved figurines on rock wall, Site : Edkaal
Cave, Kerala.



Fig : 16 Engraved animal figurines on stone
burial jar, Khasi hills, Meghalaya.

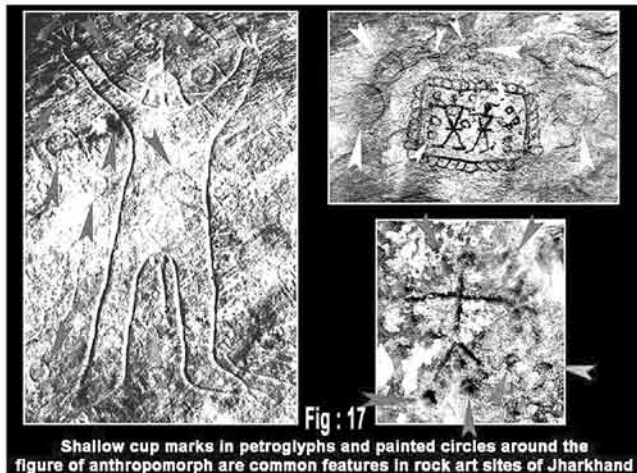


Fig : 17
Shallow cup marks in petroglyphs and painted circles around the
figure of anthropomorph are common features in rock art sites of Jharkhand



Fig : 18 Traditional wall painting of Warli Tribe, Maharashtra



Fig : 19 Traditional wall painting of Rathva Tribe, Western India

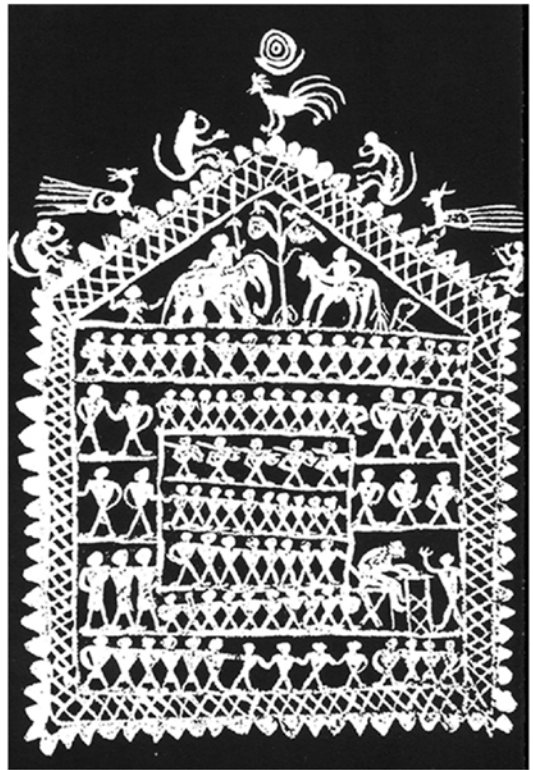


Fig : 20 Traditional wall painting of Lanjha Saora Tribe, Orissa



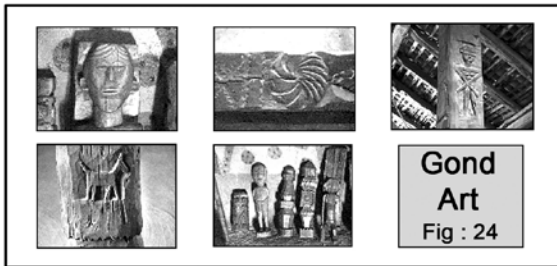
Bhil Art
Fig : 21



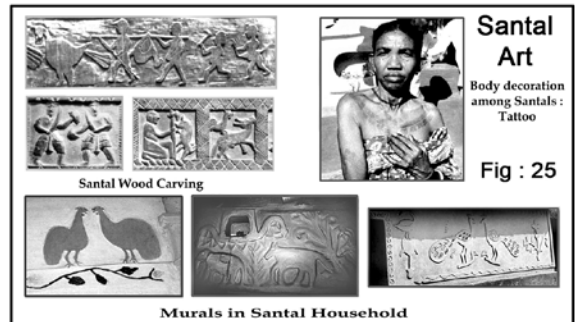
Juang Art
Orissa
Art & Material Culture in Juang Household
District : Keonjhar, Orissa



Korku Art
Orissa
Fig : 23
Korku Tribal Wood Carvings
District : Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh



Gond Art
Fig : 24



Santal Art
Body decoration among Santals :
Tattoo

Fig : 25



Murals in Santal Household



Fig : 26
Khond Metal Art
Orissa

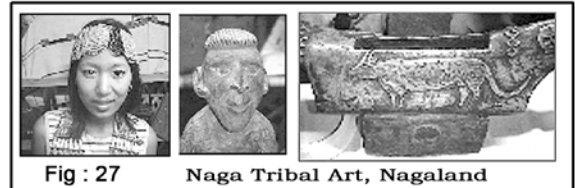


Fig : 27
Naga Tribal Art, Nagaland