Prehistoric Rock Paintings

Prehistoric Art

- Prehistory: Time period in the past when there was no paper or the written word and hence no books or written accounts of events. Information about such an age is obtained from excavations which reveal paintings, pottery, habitat, etc.
- Drawings and paintings were the oldest form of artistic expression practiced by humans. Reasons for such drawings: Either to decorate their homes, or and to keep a journal of events in their lives.
- Lower and middle Palaeolithic Periods have not shown any evidence of art works so far. The Upper Palaeolithic Age shows a lot of artistic activities.
- Earliest paintings in India are from the Upper Palaeolithic Age.
- The first discovery of rock paintings in the world was made in India by archaeologist Archibald Carleyle in 1867 – 68 (in Sohagighat, Mirzapur District, and Uttar Pradesh).
- Rock paintings have been found in the walls of caves at Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Karnataka, some in the Kumaon Hills of Uttarakhand.
- Paintings at the rock shelters at Lakhudiyar on the banks of the Suyal River (Uttarakhand) –
  1. 3 categories of paintings: man, animal and geometric patterns in black, white and red ochre.
  2. Humans in stick-like forms, a long snouted animal, a fox, a multiple-legged lizard, wavy lines, groups of dots and rectangle-filled geometric designs, hand-linked dancing humans.
- Paintings in Kupgallu (Telangana), Piklihal and Tekkalkota (both in Karnataka)
  1. Mostly in white and red ochre.
  2. Subjects are bulls, sambhars, elephants, sheep, gazelles, goats, horses, stylised humans and tridents.
- Paintings in the Vindhya ranges at Madhya Pradesh extending into Uttar Pradesh –
  1. About 500 rock shelters at Bhimbetka in the Vindhya Hills at Madhya Pradesh.
  2. Images of hunting, dancing, music, elephant and horse riders, honey collection, animal fighting, decoration of bodies, household scenes, etc.
  3. Bhimbetka drawings can be categorised into 7 Periods.
    a. Period I: Upper Palaeolithic
    b. Period II: Mesolithic
    c. Period III: Chalcolithic
Two major sites of prehistoric rock/cave paintings in India: Bhimbetka Caves and Jogimara Caves (Amarnath, Madhya Pradesh).

**Bhimbetka Paintings**

- Continuous occupation of these caves from 100000 BC to 1000 AD.
- Discovered by archaeologist V S Wakankar in 1957 – 58.
- One of the oldest paintings in India and the world.

**Period I (Upper Palaeolithic)**

1. Linear representations of animals like bisons, tigers, elephants, rhinos and boars; stick-like human figures.
2. Paintings in green and dark red. Green paintings are of dancers and red ones are of hunters.

**Period II (Mesolithic)**

1. Largest number of paintings in this period.
2. More themes but paintings reduce in size.
3. Mostly hunting scenes – people hunting in groups with barbed spears, arrows and bows, and pointed sticks. Also show traps and snares to catch animals.
4. Hunters wear simple clothes; some men are shown with head dresses and masks. Women have been shown both clothed and in the nude.
5. Animals seen – elephants, bisons, bears, tigers, deer, antelopes, leopards, panthers, rhinos, frogs, lizards, fish, squirrels and birds.
6. Children are seen playing and jumping. Some scenes depict family life.

**Period III (Chalcolithic)**

1. Paintings indicate an association of these cave-dwellers with the agricultural communities settled at Malwa.
2. Cross-hatched squares, lattices, pottery and metal tools are depicted.
3. Colours used in Bhimbetka paintings – white, yellow, orange, red ochre, purple, brown, green and black. Most common colours – white and red.
4. Red obtained from haematite (geru); green from chalcedony; white probably from limestone.
5. Brushes were made from plant fibre.
6. In some places, there are many layers of paintings, sometimes 20.
7. Paintings can be seen in caves that were used as dwelling places and also in caves that had some other purpose, perhaps religious.
8. The colours of the paintings have remained intact thousands of years perhaps due to the chemical reaction of the oxide present on the rock surface.