

Tracing Ethnic Identity through Prehistoric Paintings and Tribal Art in Central India

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Abstract : This paper seeks to examine how identity – a cultural self-image of a group of people develops – how they live, they think, they celebrate and express their world view through language, gesture, symbols, and rituals. 'Culture' is a way of life and 'identity' is assertion of that cultural self-image practiced by the group. The way in which peoples live varies from time to time and from place to place. This variation is important for their identity. Archaeologists have classified these patterns of spacial variations as 'archaeological culture.' These cultures are identified 'self-consciously' with a particular social group indicating ethnicity. The ethnic identity as archaeological cultures also legitimizes the claims of modern groups to territory. In prehistoric research problems of ethnicity and multiculturalism, stylistic attributes significantly reflect both group membership and individuality. In India, anthropologists feel that though tribes have suffered relative isolation through history, they have remained an integral part of Indian civilization. The term 'tribe' calls for substitution with a more meaningful name with an indigenous flavour 'Adivasi' (original inhabitants of the land). While studying prehistoric rock paintings from central India - Sonbhadra (Uttar Pradesh) and Bhimbetka (Madhya Pradesh), one is struck by the similarity between stylistic attributes of painted motifs in the prehistoric rock shelters and the present day indigenous art of Kol and Bhil tribes in the area, who have not seen these prehistoric rock paintings, yet are carrying on with the tradition of painting and decorating their houses in the same way. They worship concretionary sandstone blocks with triangular laminae as Goddess, Devi, Shakti. This practice is going on since Upper Palaeolithic period confirmed by archaeological excavation. The past is legitimizing the role of the present groups by allowing them to trace their roots from earlier times.

Keywords : ethnic identity, hermeneutics, semiotics, Adivasi

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