

Depiction of Rhinoceros: Transition from Popular Art to State Sponsored Art

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Introduction

Rhinoceros is an animal of great antiquity in India. The Lower Pleistocene strata in North West India is in fact characterised by the presence of fossil remains of rhinoceros, and by the Upper Pleistocene times species like *Rhinoceros deccanensis* (Badam 1985: 123, 128) had already made deeper forays as known from fossils in Krishna Valley. On the other hand, *Rhinoceros unicornis*, the only species presently surviving in the country is reported as early as from the strata of middle-late Pleistocene period in Narmada valley (Badam 2001: i-xxiv; 2001a: 61-76) and late Pleistocene times on the basis of the fossils found from Mirzapur region (*I.A.R.* 1981-82: 45). Early association of man and the animal is understood in the context of bone remains from Sarai Nahar Rai (district Pratapgadh) (Jayaswal 1989: 394) Mesolithic Langhnaj (Badam 1994: 240), Neolithic Chirand (Roy 1989: 104). At Langhnaj a bone of the animal was used as an anvil perhaps for making microlithic tools (Badam 1994: 240). Evidently, man from the earliest times was roaming around areas of water sources and became familiar with this animal and eventually started to hunt them. Hunting of rhinoceros was therefore commonly represented in rock paintings from as early as the Mesolithic times. It was an animal commonly depicted in diverse thematic compositions in rock paintings of north India. The Harappans civilization also has produced numerous evidence of the proximity of this animal. Besides bones of the animal reported from several sites (Thomas et al. 1996: 301) the sheer variety of mediums of expression, namely terracotta figurines, steatite seals, terracotta masks (Dhavlikar 1984: 250), copper tablet (Ratnagar 2004: 42), glazed cylindrical seal (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1982: 61-68), bronze image (Dhavlikar 1982: 361-366) in Harappan and affiliated contexts shows the deep admiration of the Harappans for this animal. The depiction of the animal in religious imagery in the famous proto-Siva seal exemplifies the same. The tradition of depictions of rhinoceros continued in the rock paintings and occasional terracotta (Chakravarti et al. 1989: 75) even in the Chalcolithic period followed by those of the Early-Historic period.

Interestingly, a paucity of depiction of this animal is noticed in the O.C.P./ Copper Hoard and P.G.W. Cultures. Even though acknowledging the fact that mostly the excavators do not enumerate the name of the animals and find it sufficient to term them under the general heading 'terracotta animals' the sudden paucity in the background of significant traditional continuity, is enigmatic. The earlier thread was picked up again during the Mauryan period wherein depictions although scarce, are reported. It is the Jainas and the Buddhist who have all along been instrumental in causing the maximum number of depictions. Although Kumar Gupta coins (Gupta 2004: 72) also depict the animal it is in self exaltation of the emperors who is shown slaying a rhinoceros. The portrayals are depreciatory of the animal if looked at from the point of view of what the animal stood for, although the slaying is reputedly intended to show the conquering of eastern parts of India (Dhavlikar 1982: 361-366). The latter assumption does not appear to be tenable as the animal was surviving in good numbers in Vindhyan region also. In fact, it appears that the rhinoceros slaying depictions continued as a general imagery in Gupta coins. The depictions in popular art was however steadily decreasing as the animals popularity had already started to fall from as early as the O.C.P./ Copper Hoard Culture's period which was reflected in the decreasing number of portrayals. By the early medieval times rhinoceros was an animal that was least depicted even though it was not absent as reported by Sonawane (2002: 72) in the context of Gujarat up to 16th century AD and by several others with regard to Mughal and later paintings of the animal. Evidently, the animal was surviving till around the 17th century at the least, in north India. It is only later that the animal became restricted to the north-eastern parts of the country. Thus the strange paucity of depictions barring the few of Jaina or Buddhist affiliation and the depreciating state sponsored coin portrayals, for more than 1000 years until Mughals brought the animal to limelight again, cannot be explained by contending that the animal was not existing in these parts of north India. Unlike the popular depictions earlier - excluding the Gupta coins - most of the depictions of rhinoceros in the later part, from the Mughal period onwards, are state sponsored or affiliated with the state or nobility. The depiction by the masses was now a thing of the past as far as evidence is available at present.

Rock Paintings

During the Mesolithic and protohistoric period rhinoceros was a popular subject of depiction in rock art. Thus besides the numerous rock painting sites with single depiction of rhinoceros there are several which are having more than few depictions separated by time, space or thematic compositions. Some of the known sites with paintings of the animal include: Panchmukhi, Ghormanger, Panchmukhi, Morhana Nala, (Wakankar 2005: 35, 45, 63) Lekhania near Rajpur and Romp (*I.A.R. 1956-57: 14-15*), all in Mirzapur region; Deorkothar (pl. 6.1), Itar Pahar (*I.A.R. 1961-62: 24*), Deora Bijawar (Wakankar 2005: 96), Rock Shelter no 9 near Jhiriya (Singh 1998: 138), all in Rewa district; Bhimbetka, Ramchhajja, Hathitol, Ghatla, Kharwai, Lakhajuar, Putlikar, all in Raisen district (Wakankar 2005: 123, 125-127, 133, 200, 202); Marodeo in Pachmadhi area (Dubey, 1992: 132-133), Adamgarh (Wakankar 2005: 356-358), in Hoshangabad district, Kathothiya (near Bhopal) and miscellaneous sites in north India. The latter include: South Kaimur Hills, (Bihar) (Prasad 1996: 88), Bairagarh (Varanasi) (Wakankar 2005: 32), Narsinghgarh (Rajgarh, M.P.) (Wakankar 2005: 356-358), Vikramkhol (Orissa) (Wakankar 2005: 256), Kanyadehe (Chambal Valley) (Kumar 2001: 27), Bilas River site (Rajasthan) (*I.A.R. 1981-82: 56*) Tarsang (Gujarat) (Sonawane 2002: 72) and Chaturbhujnath Nala (Mandsaur) (Neumayer 1983: 147-148). Amongst these sites Bhimbetka, Lakhajuar (pl. 6.2) and Chaturbhujnath Nala have more than one depiction, wherein the animal is portrayed in different context. The animal in general is shown in group, being hunted, chasing the hunter, or else shown as an isolated animal. Some of the better known hunting scene include those from Ghormanger, Harni Harn (Mathpal 1992: 207-208), Bhimbetka (Mathpal 1984: 105) and

Marodeo (Dubey 1992: 133). At many places these are shown in groups of two or more. Chaturbhujnath Nala (Mandsaur) (pl. 6.3) is a site which has several different compositions portraying the rhinoceros in various rock shelters. Rhinoceros mask has also been inferred from rock paintings (Dubey 1992: 132-133). The portrayal of rhinoceros along with the said post Harappan script at Kanyadehe shows the continuity of painting traditions. The above enumeration of sites with depiction of rhinoceros is obviously not a complete list of those already known but at least it shows that the frequency of depiction of the animal, the least said, is not inconspicuous in rock art.

Harappan Civilization

The long association of rhinoceros and man has been continued in the Harappan Civilization also. Unlike mere portrayals - baring those showing the animal being hunted - the resource base relation becomes clear from the bones of the animal found at Harappa, Kalibangan, Lothal, Kuntasi, Surkotada, Oriya Timbo and Khanpur (Thomas et al. 1996: 301). Depiction on seals are commonly known from Harappan sites like: Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Allahadino (Fairservis 1982: 107-112), etc. and from Harappan affinity sites like Shortughai (Francfort 1984: 301-310) and Tell Asmar (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1982: 61-68). Terracotta images are commonly reported from several Harappan sites. In fact, recent excavations at Harappa have brought to light terracotta images of rhinoceros which is more than twice the numbers compared to images of sheep and goat clubbed together (Dales and Kenoyer 1993: 502, 505). Other medium of expression representing the animal include, copper tablet (Ratnagar 2004: 42) and terracotta masks found from Mohenjo-daro (Dhavlikar 1984: 250). The several medium of expression and numerous depictions of the animal not only indicate the humid Harappan environment but also the continuity of ancient traditions albeit modified from the earlier 2 - dimensional to the later 3 - dimensional forms. From the Late Harappan (Dhavlikar 1984: 250), context also a rhinoceros mask was found at Varsus in Dhulia district. Other later plastic forms include the Daimabad Bronze rhinoceros (Dhavlikar 1982: 361-366) and terracotta image of chalcolithic site Dangwada (Chakravarti et al. 1989: 75) (district Ujjain). The depiction of Kanyadehe (Kumar 2001: 27) also hints towards the continuity of the traditions.

Decrease in Depictions

In spite of the long tradition of portrayal a conspicuous absence of depiction is noticed in the O.C.P., P.G.W. settings, till now. This observation evidently could be countered by the lack of information of the present author and also be due to the fact that most excavators tend to generalize the findings and the rhinoceros images could as well be clubbed under group heading 'animals'. However, the general decrease in number of depictions following these periods hints towards the changing mindset regarding this animal. The rhinoceros figures of Murtaziganj disc (Gupta 1980: 53-72) and Bhita seal (Chandra 1970: 36) of the Mauryan (N.B.P.W.) settings are perhaps the only examples which stretches the continuity of the hoary tradition. Pertinently, this continuity was more conspicuously reflected in art associated with Jainism and Buddhism as at Jain stupa (Smith 1994: 40, pl. LXXX) at Kankali Tila, Mathura; 2nd century BC, later depictions with Tirthankar Sreyamsnatha, Stupa no. 2 at Sanchi; 2nd century BC (pl. 6.4), terracotta image (*IAR* 1962-63: 46-47) associated with circular basements suggestive of votive stupas dated around 4th-6th century AD at Chandraketugarh, district 24 Parganas, Jain caves of Udayagiri and Khandagiri of early medieval period (Mohapatra 1981: 196), terracotta plaque (*IAR* 1999-2000: 155) of stupa at Shyam Sundar Tilla, Tripura; 9th-10th century AD. Overall however, popular depictions were decreasing. And after the Gupta Rhinoceros Slayer type coin for more than a millennia the depictions are very scarce. Apparently, the animal did not remain popular anymore not only because of it becoming rare but also perhaps due to the fact that it came to be depreciated. Secondly, the society

had new imageries entrenched in the minds of the people for instance the stronger elephant and the faster horse, the latter was already started to be depicted from the protohistoric times. Perhaps, besides the other presently unknown reasons the two later mentioned animals stole the attention given to rhinoceros and vis a vis the later came to be depreciated. It is also possible that the animal was consciously derided by the thinkers of the later societies, which left the artists with few patrons. This albeit is an unsubstantiated opinion arising only out of the fact that even though the numbers were reducing the animal was still around for quite some time more, well up to the Mughal times even in other parts of north India besides of course the north east.

The Hiatus

It is obvious that from the O.C.P. and P.G.W. periods that the depictions became rare. In this context it is possible that environment and decreasing numbers was one possible factor. Alternatively, lack of utility of the animal in the resource base of the society, outright nuisance in agriculture in limited feasible areas could be another reason. Albeit whatever be the reason, the fall from grace of this animal during the above periods is clearly apparent. Eventhough there are isolated examples seen in Mauryan (N.B.P.W.), Jaina and Buddhist contexts the portrayals had become progressively less after the Harappans. The depiction of rhinoceros in the coins of the Gupta coins are aberrations on two counts namely it is not part of popular depictions, has the primary purpose of exalting the virtues of the emperor and is also in fact depreciating the animal perhaps taking cue of the general depreciative air around the animal. Baring very few examples that too largely of the eastern regions depictions of rhinoceros did not remain popular even before the advent of the first millennium AD. Pertinently, scholars at large agree that the animal was very much around in north India till only few centuries before present. Baring the rare examples the hiatus in depictions of the animal could be placed for well over a Millennium when due to Mughals it resurfaced again.

State Depictions

The Mughals not aware of the unappreciative air regarding this animal were impressed by it. They portrayed it in art (Baburnama) (Randhawa 1983: 50, 121; Gascoigne 1998: 38) mentioned in literature (Jehangirnama) (Das 1978: 148-149) carved relief panel on architecture (Sarai at Nurmahal; Ludhiana) (Joshi and Krishnadeva 1999: 155) and in fact brought into light an animal that had gone into oblivion. Now rhinoceros was again in vogue but only in art associated with nobility. Later works of art include: Mir Kalam Khans (Allahabad)(Losty 2002: 50) painting of hunting scene done in 18th century and the wall painting on Sri Kumar Singh Champawat ki Chhatri (Jaipur) done in 19th century (Chaturvedi 2000: 69). Later, after British times also the rhinoceros was depicted but largely in state sponsored works of arts like on postage stamps, coins and currency note (pl. 6.5). There are other representations of the animals for example as emblems of government organization (pl. 6.5) and some large companies. In the latter case, the image of the animal was being portrayed in large numbers but along with objects of mass production. Pertinently, the significant point is that the representations never again became part of art associated with common people.

Discussion

If carefully looked at the rarity of rhinoceros depiction for over a millennium is intriguing. It cannot be due to the decreasing numbers of rhinoceros alone as its depiction leaving aside those rarely in Jaina and Buddhist contexts, is virtually absent and is again seen significantly from the time of Mughals. If it was only due to decreasing numbers of rhinoceros then the number of depictions should have gradually declined and reduced to the numbers found around the later part of Mughal period when the animal almost ceased to exist in north India except in the North East.

Evidently, besides reduction in numbers and therefore lack of prototypes before the artists there were several mutually overlapping factors, namely: lack of utility in resource base of the society, new ideological imageries that left out the rhinoceros and perhaps derision of the animal for the same reason. Or else, how does one explain the strange paucity of an animal that was a theme of numerous rock paintings, terracottas and seals the latter including it in religious imageries as in the Pashupati seal, the Daimabad bronze figure, depictions in Jaina and Buddhist art, etc. Undoubtedly, the changing mindset of the society towards this animal also had a significant, role in the paucity of depictions for more than a millennium. Perhaps deeper researches could bring out the reasons for this supposed change of mindset.

Conclusion

Evidently, the number of examples cited cannot be portraying the full picture, yet a definite outline is emerging showing the broad trend. Broadly it can be asserted that the depiction of rhinoceros was very much in vogue from the Mesolithic times but started decreasing with the waning of the Harappan Civilization, continued sporadically in Mauryan, Jaina, Buddhist and/or eastern Indian context, had a yawning gap of over a millennia before the Mughals gave cognition to the animal in the Indo-Gangetic doab region. The trend was followed from the top levels: of state, state organization and companies but it could not reintroduce portrayal of rhinoceros as part of popular art. In this context, one is reminded of a popular nursery rhyme: Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall (of popularity), Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, All the King's men and all the King's horses could not put Humpty Dumpty back again.

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