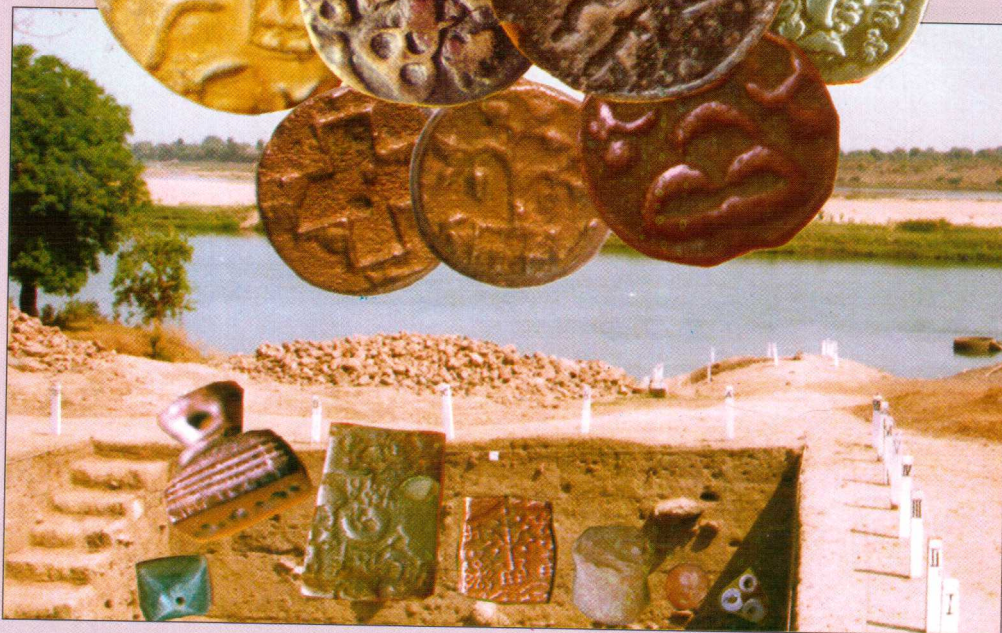


NARMADA VALLEY CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION



Editor
Dr. S.K. Bhatt
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THE ACADEMY OF INDIAN NUMISMATICS AND SIGILLOGRAPHY

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Professor S.K. Bhatt



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COHABITATION OF RHINOCEROS AND MAN IN THE NARMADA VALLEY AND NEIGHBOURING REGIONS: SOME OBSERVATIONS

● J. Manuel

Introduction

Even before the advent of man various primitive forms of the modern rhinoceros were at home in various parts of India including Madhya Pradesh. The Lower Pleistocene strata in North West India is in fact characterized by the presence of fossil remains of Rhinoceros, besides other animals like *Equus*, *Elephas* and *Bos* and by the upper Pleistocene times species like *Rhinoceros deccanensis* (Badam 1985 pp 123,128) had already made deeper forays as known from fossils in Krishna Valley. In Narmada Valley also evidence of *Rhinoceros unicornis* (Badam 2001: p XX & Badam 2001a: p 73) has been reported from strata of Middle-Late Pleistocene period. Evidence of *Homo sapiens* (archaic) has also been obtained from the state as recorded by the various fossil finds that has been reported from the Narmada Valley. In fact the association of man and rhinoceros is very old as seen by the fossil evidence of both, in this part of the country. Later the rock paintings of the animal in the immediate Narmada valley and its catchment area besides adjoining areas all show the importance of rhinoceros in the primitive mans scheme of things. The popularity of the animal has been revealed in the protohistoric plastic art also. Although not in the area of study per se the general popularity of the animal has been observed very much by the numerous depiction of the animal in the object of Indus valley Civilization. Perhaps after the mythical animal unicorn, the *Rhinoceros unicornis* was one animal, which was commonly depicted along with bull, tiger, elephant etc. The medium of art here included steatite seals, terracotta figures, masks, copper tablets, etc. The Plastic art was not limited to the Harappans but later cultures also like, Daimabad bronze (Dhavlikar

1982:pp361-366), Varsus in Dhulia district (Dhavalikar 1984: p 250) and comparatively closer to Narmada valley the terracotta image found from Dangwada (Chakravarti, *et. al.*1989: p75) in Ujjain district reveal the prevailing widespread tradition. Curiously enough, rhinoceros is conspicuous by its absence in the context of OCP and PGW Cultures and again seen in the context of Mauryan period on a seal (Pramod Chandra1970: p. 36) on a disc (Gupta 1980: pp53-72,) remains besides Jaina (Smith 1994:p 40 and Mahapatra 1981: p 196) and Buddhist Art (as at Sanchi and Shyam Sundar Tilla in South Tripura (*I.A.R. 1999-2000*: p155).

By and large this indigenous animal so popular from prehistoric times through out the northern part of the country including Madhya Pradesh was apparently falling out of grace perhaps as early as the OCP Period. Baring for the occasional depiction on art associated with religion the decline in portrayal was perceptible. Although the animal is shown on Gupta coins (Dhavalikar 1982: p 366) it evidently is shown depreciatingly as being slain. This phenomenon of decreasing depictions cannot be directly correlated to the diminishing numbers of the animal. Firstly, the term *Genda* continues to be very much in vogue in Hindi Language showing that it was very much in existence in several parts of north India and therefore known from Mughal sources. In fact Mughals blissfully unaware of the general depreciating aura around the animal were awed by it and depicted it in art, (Gascoigne 1998: p. 142) architecture (Joshi & Deva 1999:p 155) and literature (Das 1978 :pp.148,149). It is intriguing that an animal, which evokes awe and was depicted in various ways in prehistoric paintings, as part of religious scene in Harappan seals, as terracotta figures, as masks worn by artists in Harappan and Late Harappan (Dhavalikar 1984: p 250) and several other contexts, was scarcely portrayed later, even though it was very much there till at least 17th century A.D.

Pertinently the examples from north India show that the Narmada valley resonated with other regions from the prehistoric times and therefore influenced and was also influenced by extraneous influences. In the ensuing narration it would be more obvious that the Narmada valley was very much a part and parcel of the geographical term 'Aryavarta'. Evidently therefore once the largely 'peoples art depiction of rhinoceros' had ceased as a tradition the state (Mughal) influenced tradition could hardly penetrate here, partly because rhinoceros had already become a very rare animal in this region, by then.

Fossil Evidence

Although rhinoceros originated (Badam1985: p 133) in the farther situated North America, it had arrived in South East Asia many hundred thousand years before man who had his origin in Africa. Thus even before

the advent of any of the variants within the *genus Homo* could get access in the subcontinent different species of the *genus Rhinoceros* namely: *Rhinoceros bicornis*, *Rhinoceros deccanensis*, *Rhinoceros sivalensis*, etc. roamed the subcontinent during the Pleistocene period. In Narmada valley also the genus rhinoceros has been reported about the middle Pleistocene times. *Rhinoceros unicornis* had already come into existence during the late Pleistocene times, as understood by the fossil remains reported from Central Narmada dated to this period (Badam 2001, p XX). Man evidently, learned to coexist with this animal in the moist ecological patches where he often roamed in search for food and water. Later, with the innovation of better tool types, he started to hunt this animal, as discerned by hunting scenes by rock paintings emphatically depicted in the rock paintings.

The Narmada valley has also yielded fossilized human remains, which has not only brought attention to the valley but also to India at large. The finding of a skullcap from Hathnora from the riverbeds of Narmada has helped in our understanding of the South Asian Homonids as a whole. Although, earlier thought of as the cranial portion of *Homo erectus* it is now largely agreed to be that of early *Homo sapiens* (Badam 2001a: pp 65,72). On the other hand the finding of left and right clavicles and a portion of ninth rib at Hathnora of a short and stocky archaic *Homo* (Sankhyan 2005: p 706) shows the fossil evidence of early man, which incidentally is over and above the numerous stone tools hinting to the great antiquity of man in the Narmada valley. The cranium and the post-cranials according to Sankhyan could as well be of the same skeleton in view of their being found at the same site and stratigraphic position, besides the inferred same female sex and similar age (Sankhyan 2005: p 706). Either way, whether of single skeleton or different skeletons the fact remains, man and rhinoceros were cohabitating the valley from the most early prehistoric times. This association was later reflected in the Mesolithic paintings in Central India especially in the catchment area of the valley, which depict rhinoceros either singularly or as being hunted.

Rock Paintings

In north India there are many rock paintings of rhinoceros that primarily belong to the Mesolithic period but are also seen in contexts of later times. In the early context these have been reported -other than the particular area of study- from Bairagarh (Varanasi), Panchmukhi (Robertsganj), Ghormanger (Robertsganj), Morhana Nala (Bhainsor Hanmana) Deora Bijawar (Bijawar), Vikram Khol (Sambhalpur, Orissa) (Wakankar 2005: pp32,35,45,63,96,256) . It has also been observed at rock shelter near Deour Kothar stupa in Distt Rewa. A painting of rhinoceros has been long known from Narsinghgarh Rock No 10 (Wakankar 1973: pp 391,392; Wakankar

2005: pp 357,358). Kumar (2001: p 27) has reported a rhinoceros painting from Kanyadeh in Chambal valley along with graffiti surmised as post Harappan script. Rock painting of rhinoceros of unspecified antiquity (*IAR* 1981-82: p56) has been reported from the rock shelters in Distt Kota near the river Bias a tributary of the Parvati River. Evidently, although the list is not exhaustive but it is clear that the tradition of making rock paintings with the theme of rhinoceros was popular during the Mesolithic period from east to west in north India that was also to reflect in the rock paintings and plastic art of the later times. The number of rock paintings of rhinoceros depicted in the Narmada valley and its drainage area also endorse the above-mentioned fact.

Raisen district which is drained by the tributaries of Narmada on the south has yielded a number of prehistoric and protohistoric sites depicting rock paintings of rhinoceros. Several paintings of the animal are dated to the Mesolithic Period. These sites include: Urden, Gelpur, Jaora and Bhimbetka (Neumayer 1993: pp 62,63,70). The Urden rhinoceros apparently shows two horns (Neumayer 1992: p 226). The depiction at Jaora shows the man trying to escape from the charging animal. One rhinoceros depiction in Bhimbetka shows it being hunted, with the charging animal having tossed one of the hunters into the air while other hunters stand waiting with spear in their hands. There is yet another depiction of rhinoceros which is at Zoo Rock in Bhimbetka. It is painted in white along with other paintings of the protohistoric period. Herein no particular activity around this animal has been portrayed (fig-1) Paintings of rhinoceros have been reported from several rock shelters of Lakhjuar (Mathpal 1984: 105) in the Bhimbetka general cluster of rock shelters. Two rock paintings of rhinoceros reported from Ramchhajja in the same district is dated to the Chalcolithic Period (Neumayer 1983: p 110). From Kathotia (Neumayer 1983: p 67) near Bhopal two rhinoceros figures are noticed as part of single composition. Near the very Narmada river bank itself the rock shelters at Adamgarh in Hoshangabad district has yielded the painting of rhinoceros, reported first by Manoranjan Ghosh and Gordon (Wakankar 2005: pp357,358). Wakankar describes the painting of rhinoceros at Adamgadh No 10 as having the front and back portion washed and the middle portion left to be filled in by horizontal zig-zag lines. Further south beyond the Narmada also the rock shelters at Maradeo near Pachmarhi in Hoshangabad district shows an aggressive rhinoceros and a hunter carrying bow and arrow. (Dubey 1992: p 133). In this context Dubey has opined that during the Mesolithic period rhinoceros mask (1992:p 132) was perhaps being used during dancing, which hints towards the continuity of traditions across time and space as exemplified by the Harappan and Late Harappan terracotta masks of rhinoceros, mentioned above.

Plastic Art

Drawing on the long association with rhinoceros in the entire subcontinent, the Harappans also portrayed it in seals and as terracotta figures. The continuity of depiction of rhinoceros has been seen as at Daimabad, district Ahmednagar and Dangwada in Ujjain Distt, south and north of the Narmada valley, respectively. In the realm of three dimensional art one would also recall the rhinoceros specimens portrayed during the Mauryan Period. Although herein connections between different cultures are not being necessarily stressed on the basis of the presence of rhinoceros, yet it appears that the animal apparently formed a common thread in the life of the ancient people of the subcontinent, including those in and around this region. The only exceptions are: the region far south of Narmada where it was already extinct, and the Ganga Yamuna Doab region especially during the OCP and PGW periods.

With the lapse of time rhinoceros, evidently did not remain a popular subject for depiction. One of the last such known sculptural depiction excluding in association with *Sreyamsnatha* is that of the animal on the balustrades of Stupa no 2, Sanchi dated to the middle of 2nd century BC. Here the animal is not outlined properly and shows that the animal was portrayed not on actually seeing it (fig-2) but on hearing the details about it. Evidently the artist may have made it on the insistence of the sponsor of the particular pillar. The depiction therefore does not have the fineness of earlier art of the Harappan seals and terracottas nor even the later Mauryan ones. The animal has also been portrayed on Gupta coins. Herein however, the mint master had done a good job of it and definitely had seen the animal umpteen times. The king slaying the rhinoceros depicted on the coin is symbolic, like many other depictions of the Gupta period. Rhinoceros was surviving later in the seventh century also as Bana Bhatta-the author of *Harsha charita*, while referring to the fauna of the forest region south of Ganga valley referred to it as *Khangi dham* meaning cow with a sword (Wakankar 2005: p 356). Interestingly, Bana does not depreciate the existence of the animal but refers to it as the grace of the Vindhians. Again coincidentally another known depiction of the animal happens to be in the Buddhist context on the terracotta plaques of stupa at Shyam Sundar Tilla in South Tripura dated to 9th -10th century AD (*IAR*. 1999-2000: p155). Much later, it finds mention and is depicted in Mughal literature and art, respectively. It also finds place in sculptured panels in Mughal architecture. Evidently, this animal was surviving as late as the Mughal times. Sonawane (2002: p 72) has suggested that this animal survived in Gujarat till 16th century AD.

Concluding observations

In view of the hoary antiquity of association of rhinoceros and man in the subcontinent including in the Narmada valley as known by the many rock paintings and creations of art in this region and elsewhere the near absence of evidence of this animal in different segments of time and space requires explanation. The most conspicuous absence is in cultural material related to OCP and PGW sites where not even a single depiction is known presently. The complete absence of depiction of this animal along with NBPW associated cultural remains times, is prevented by two known depictions of the Mauryan Period (Pramod Chandra 1970: p 36 and Gupta 1980: pp 53-72) occurring in contexts showing social significance of the animal. After the Mauryan Period the ancient tradition of portraying rhinoceros have been found off and on only in association with Jain and Buddhist architecture. Although rhinoceros is depicted on the Gupta coins it is depreciated here being shown as smaller and being killed. It appears that with passage of time not only rhinoceros did not evoke awe anymore but it had also become an animal to be looked down at.

What could be the reasons behind the sea change in attitude towards this animal? Was it that the society had taken up more interesting mascots for example the faster horse or the stronger elephant for depiction in art. The paucity of the animal alone could not be the reason as evidence of the animal north of the Vindhyas up to as late as 17th century AD is very much there. Could it be that the animal that once endeared the masses was frowned upon by the higher classes later and therefore did not find expression in art also. The Mughals unaware of the general air of derision around this animal although brought it into light could not bring it back to the same status favourite of the masses. This may be due to fact that the animal was fast becoming extinct in north India except in the eastern regions. Secondly with better mascots with the society like the faster horse and the larger and stronger elephant this animal popular in the ancient societies had by the time of Mughals remained derided for countless generations. Thus inspite of the admiration of the Mughals for the animal it could not rebound back into light for the two reasons mentioned above. Admittedly, although the number of examples cited are few and far in between, and may not even be half of that is already known yet a trend can be discerned. A holistic study not only of the complete known material remains but also of available literature and the present cultural nuances about the animal across different regions including the Narmada valley would help in the emergence of a better picture of the ancient societies.

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Fig. 1 : Rhinoceros of the protohistoric period painted in white at Zoo-Rock in Bhimbetka, Distt. Raisen M.P.



Fig. 2 : Rhinoceros depicted on pillar of Gateway of Stupa no.2, Sanchi, Distt Raisen; M.P.

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