



## Symbolic narratives of fertility: rock art representations of pregnancy and childbirth across cultures

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### Introduction

In early times when humans used to live in small clans and their living was based on hunting and gathering, the main asset of their life was human resources therefore, one of the main concerns of that time was to increase the young members of clans who could participate in hunting and gathering. Subsequently, with time their subsistence pattern changed and their requirements also included land, cattle, boats, etc. They settled in one place and began cultivation, agriculture, and a complex economy. In all these cases, a suitable amount of population plays an important role in running a society. Although we have reached the era of the extreme mass population if we see the graph rate of the past 200 years, this huge population is the result of modern medicine and reduced death rates, whereas 200 years ago medical facilities were not so advanced, then thousands of years ago, our ancestors were probably fighting with the problem of higher death rates and still births. To increase the numbers of humans and animals; fertility, pregnancy, and successful delivery were the most important things and major concerns of those times. They believed in many rituals and totems to prevent mishaps in reproduction. There are many instances of fertility cults in archaeology and rock art yet most of them describe the effigies of mother goddesses or abstract symbols such as triangle or vulva signs, rings, circles, cup marks, phallus objects, etc. This paper aims to focus on the narrative representation of fertility and reproduction focusing on their symbolic meaning. In this research paper, we will discuss human and animal pregnancy and delivery scenes in rock art and their symbolism. We will be giving some new data and reinterpreting previously published data for our study.

### The symbolic aspect of rock art

Human has two aspects of living their life: physical or external aspect and mental or spiritual aspect (it can be called religion in a contracted manner). Both are not quite separate; they are interconnected to support the life system. Spirituality can also be understood as a mental support system to appreciate or confront external events. The mythologies, gods, totems, superstitions, supernatural powers, and related functions are part of this mental support system. In the same way, the physical needs and problems are responsible for the internal processes. The type of mental support system depends on the external problems. Archaeology is the study of remains of human life. Whatever we find as remains of human activities, also have two aspects: material (physical) and symbolic (mental). In this case, we think rock art is the presentation of the symbolic life of past people. It is not the eye copy of their actual life or the phenomenon of art for art sake but it is their mental perception of reality that they have left on rocks. Perception of reality means our beliefs for the actual or real world which is made by the wholistic approach of society. To understand their perception, we have to read their minds through their symbols. The depiction of

pregnancy and delivery in rock art can be added with the concept of visualizing motherhood or womanhood. In early societies, we see people gave huge respect and a higher place to natural phenomena. The birth of a child is the greatest gift of nature to all living beings, the people and society perceived it as a challenge and mercy of nature, and they gave respect to the process of reproduction and womanhood. This perception was visualized in rock art. This is a natural and worldwide phenomenon so it must be found in all the rock art of the world but here we can present a few of them rest might get attention as well by the readers.

### Pregnancy and delivery scenes in world context

This part consists of such interesting depictions in rock art which are related to the symbolic depiction of fertility in other parts of the world. Garfinkel and Austin write about the Coso rock art of California in the United States, where pregnant women and animals are frequently depicted along with bighorn sheep. The depiction of bighorn sheep is associated with the fertility of women, rain making, hunting religion, etc. In these petroglyphs, the hunters have often targeted the genital area or the hind portion of bighorn sheep which is interpreted as the man wishing for a woman's fertility (Garfinkel & Austin 2011) (Fig.1). Kosovo rock art in south-west Europe, has many sexual symbols like vulva, vagina, phallus, etc., which is the main theme of Kosov rock art. An image of birth includes a deep and long incision of a female sexual organ, parallel to it depicted a phallus, and next to it four pairs copulating (Krasniqi 2017) (Fig.2). This scene is considered the symbol of fertility depicting the whole process of reproduction. Mykhailova writes that in the rock art complexes of northern Russia and Serbia, there are many pictures of a pregnant woman near a deer or reindeer. According to local myths, they think that humans originated from the deer and the first inhabitants on earth were male deer or the God-deer. Worshiping of deer mother is a part of their hunting and reproduction ceremonies. Stories of deer turning into a woman are popular in local myths (Mykhailova 2017) (Fig. 3). That's why understanding the depiction of deer with the woman or pregnant woman and hunting a deer is related to the fertility cult in the context of this place. The most ancient image of a pregnant woman near an animal depicted on an antler fragment is found in the upper paleolithic context from Laugerie-Basse, France (Mykhailova 2017). A petroglyph has been reported from the eastern part of the Kulzhabasy petroglyphs complex, Kazakhstan where "a pregnant woman stretching her arms toward the cauldron and a person kneeling in front of her and holding with one hand a leg of the women in labor and holding a knife (?) to her large abdomen in his other hand: another person, depicted to the left of the woman is holding her by her shoulder", it is dated to the end of 2nd millennium BCE (Rogozhinsky 2011:17). The important thing in this scene is that a very realistic image of delivery is shown despite any magical or mythical symbolic representation. Besides childbirth and pregnancy



**Figura 1.** A Pregnant bighorn sheep and hunter targeting hind portion of a bighorn sheep, Coso range, California (After: Garfinkel & Austin 2011).



**Figura 2.** The Image of birth with symbols of fertility, Kosovo rock art (After: S. Krasniqi 2017).



**Figura 3.** Pregnant woman and the deer. Kanozero, northern Russia (After: N. Mykhailova 2017).

scenes in rock art, there are many signs which have been considered to be a symbol of fertility and reproduction like cup marks or cupules in rock art and portable artifacts like phallus-like objects, circular or triangular stones such as vulva signs, woman figures with exaggerated reproductive parts of the body known as mother goddesses, etc. In many places, these are interpreted as fertility-related symbols with their ethnographic context. All the above examples hint towards a complex mental support system for the phenomenon related to fertility and reproduction.

#### Human pregnancy and childbirth scenes in the Indian context

In the Indian context, almost every rock art complex has a hunting scene but human pregnancy and delivery scenes are not as common as other symbols yet there are many examples of such scenes. There are many categories in these kinds of scenes. Some have been depicted with groups of humans, some with animals, and some alone. Filled pots on the heads of pregnant women is also a common thing in some pregnancy scenes found at Pachmarhi and Chambal rock art sites.

At Mahadev cave in the Pachmarhi region, there is a scene where two pregnant women are carrying filled pots on their heads (Fig.4) and following a horse and at Marhadev in the Pachmarhi region is a figure of a pregnant woman also carrying a filled pot on her head and moving to left (Gupta 1960: 491-495) (Fig.5). Although, Gupta has said that woman has carried one basket on her stomach as well but for holding something on the stomach, it is necessary to tie it around waist but there is no sign of tying something. In a unique painting from Chaturbhujnath Nala in the Chambal region of Madhya Pradesh, there are





Figura 4. Two pregnant women with pot on head and following the horse, Mahadev Cave, Pachmarhi (After: Gupta 1960 p. 508).



Figura 5. Pregnant woman with basket or pot on head, Marhadev shelter, Pachmarhi (After: Gupta 1960, p. 503)

many pregnant women in a procession carrying some objects on their heads. The procession is also joined by two rows of men with hanging objects on their shoulders and cattle. In the very front of this procession some of the ithyphallic men are fighting with humped bulls (Fig.6). It seems some kind of tradition or a part of the ritual. Bulls are considered a symbol of fertility and masculine power, ithyphallic men are a symbol of healthy manhood, and filled pots on the heads of pregnant women are a symbol of good luck. It may be a depiction of some ritual done in respect of healthy childbirth.

Childbirth scenes of women are found in rock art sites of Panchmukhi in Sonbhadra and Isko in Jharkhand. In Panchmukhi the shelter is full of some small abstract motifs similar to Brahmi scripts (maybe proto-Brahmi) like circles hanging through a curved line, dots inside some circles, and 'U' shape symbols. Among them, there is a delivery scene, in which the woman is stretching her hands and legs apart and an infant is coming out of her womb and some anthropomorphs are depicted near her legs and sides (Fig.7). A similar phenomenon is seen in Isko rock shelter where we find a very few figures of humans and animals but a lot of intricate geometric designs are present in the whole shelter. Among them is depicted a mother who is delivering a child, she has lifted her arms upside down in the style of holding something. The painting is outlined in white and red colors and filled with red color. There is a sun motif near her left waist and there is also a phallus under 'U' shape vulva sign depicted in the shelter near the right to the delivery scene (Fig.8).



Figura 6. Procession of pregnant women, men and cattle in Chaturbhujnath Nala, Chambal.





*Figura 7. Child Birth scene in Panchmukhi, Sonbhadra.*



*Figura 8. Child Birth scene, Isko.*



A pregnant woman with her family is a rare scene in rock art. Such a painting is found at the Lakhajuar rock art site in central India, where a pregnant woman and her family are sitting in a hut and having their food which includes fish (Fig.9). Neumayer has observed the object inside the stomach of a fish (Neumayer 2011:105). But, if all three people have fish as food so, why the only female is shown with the big abdomen and the object inside? On this basis, we can say the woman is pregnant in the scene. One more prehistoric family scene with a pregnant woman is recorded by Mathpal from Bhimbetka shelter no. III C9, where there are 6 members in a group, one pregnant woman is in the center of the scene, one small child playing with a stick, one aged woman wearing a rhinoceros mask probably playing with a baby, and one man walking to the left holding a stick on his shoulder and a boy is below him (Mathpal 1984: 57). There is total seventy-one women depicted in Bhimbetka paintings, only eight out of them are depicted pregnant (Mathpal 1984: 99-100).

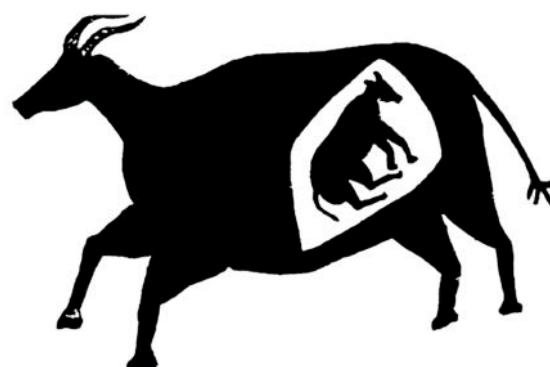
#### Animal pregnancy scenes in Indian context

Animals are the main theme of whole rock art treasure on earth; specifically, the deer, elephant, boar, and cattle are frequent matters of paintings and engraving. Forager society was economically dependent on animals which they could take anywhere they moved. They were closer to nature and gave a powerful place to animals and plants in their culture, even their mythological stories and gods were associated with animals. We have already mentioned of deer god of Eurasian rock art. In Indian culture, the concept of animal god is seen in cultural beliefs as well. Incarnations of Vishnu (Hindu deity) as 'Matsya' (fish) and 'Varah' (boar), human and animal assimilation in 'Narsimha' and 'Ganesh' and the mythical character of 'Kamdhenu' a miraculous cow who is considered as the mother of all cattle, all say of animal's place in Indian culture. The cow is considered more important than any other dairy cattle. In the Vedic period (c. 1500- c. 900 BCE), the cow was considered the mother of gods, a symbol of economy, and the main medium of exchange, milk giving cow is said to be 'Aghanya' (who should not be killed). The importance of cattle was established before civilized societies due to its benefits. Cattle can produce one offspring at a time so, their birth rate is slower than other animals. For foragers, it was more beneficial to raise cattle than only hunting them. So, the reproduction of cattle was also important for foragers.



**Figura 9.** Pregnant woman with family, Lakhajuar (After: Neumayer 2011 p.508).

There are many examples of depictions of cattle in Indian rock art as well as their pregnancy scenes are also visible in many places. In animal pregnancy scenes the fetus is often shown inside the womb to show the pregnancy and most of them are biologically appropriate in posture and position. There are many types of depictions of pregnant animals. Sometimes, only one animal in the herd is shown pregnant, for example; one pregnant cow in a row of cows is depicted with accurate posture and position of the fetus at the Baniyaberi rock art site in Pachmarhi region (Gupta 1960:163) (Fig.10), one pregnant buffalo in a herd of fleeing buffaloes is reported from Bhimbetka (Neumayer 2011:124) (Fig.11) and at Chibbar Nala in Chambal region, there is depicted a herd of cattle surrounded by three archers and one of the cows is pregnant who is being hunted by an archer (Neumayer 2011:127) (Fig.12). In these painting the posture of the fetus is biologically suitable and it is near to the delivery. These paintings are reasonably naturalistic, it seems that the painter was very familiar with animal anatomy. A pregnant cow is also depicted at the Seetakhardi group of rock shelters in the Chambal region (Gupta 1960), here the painting is quite imaginary because the fetus inside the womb is depicted with horns and in standing posture in the same way as the mother. It seems a symbolic depiction or maybe the painter is not aware of animal anatomy. Deer was also a favorite topic of prehistoric paintings, there are a lot of deer hunting scenes in Indian rock art but a few of them are also depicted as pregnant. Near Bhopal the rock shelter of Ramchhajja has a painting of a row of seven deer of which two are shown pregnant (Mathpal 1984:17). An x-ray figure of a blue bull or nilgai is also depicted in Bhimbetka, which has a fetus inside her womb (Mathpal 1984:41). In the eastern part of Vindhyan, the rock shelters of Mirzapur and Sonbhadra are very rich in paintings of different types of animals and especially for the X-ray style animal figures. A few X-ray-style paintings also depict a fetus inside the womb (Tewari 1990: 36-39). From Lakhma shelter in Mirzapur, there are two paintings of pregnant animals but both animals are unidentifiable. One of the two is an animal with an elongated body in a position of leaping and the fetus is depicted in her womb, it seems to be a deer by its leaping style (Fig.13) and another pregnant animal is depicted with a man in front of it. The full-grown fetus is shown in standing posture inside her body (Fig.14). It is noteworthy that tribal communities have set some rules for hunting like they don't hunt or kill a pregnant animal or baby animal to maintain the population of animals. They also don't



**Figura 10.** Pregnant cow with the accurate posture of fetus, Baniyaberi, Pachmarhi (After: Gupta 1960 p.198).



Figura 11. Pregnant buffalo in herd, Bhimbetka (After: Neumayer 2011 p 124).

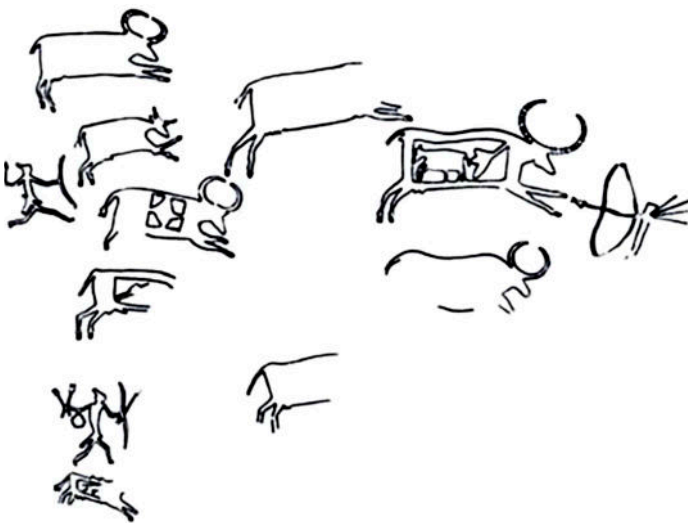


Figura 12. Pregnant cow being hunted, Chhibber Nala, Chambal (After: Neumayer 2011, p. 127).

hunt in a particular direction for a long time so that the area might not be vacant from animals. Such morality was part of prehistoric hunter and pastoral societies. These paintings might have been depicted to expect fertility and increment in the population of animals and also to teach the new or future hunters that pregnant animals are necessary that's why they should not be killed.

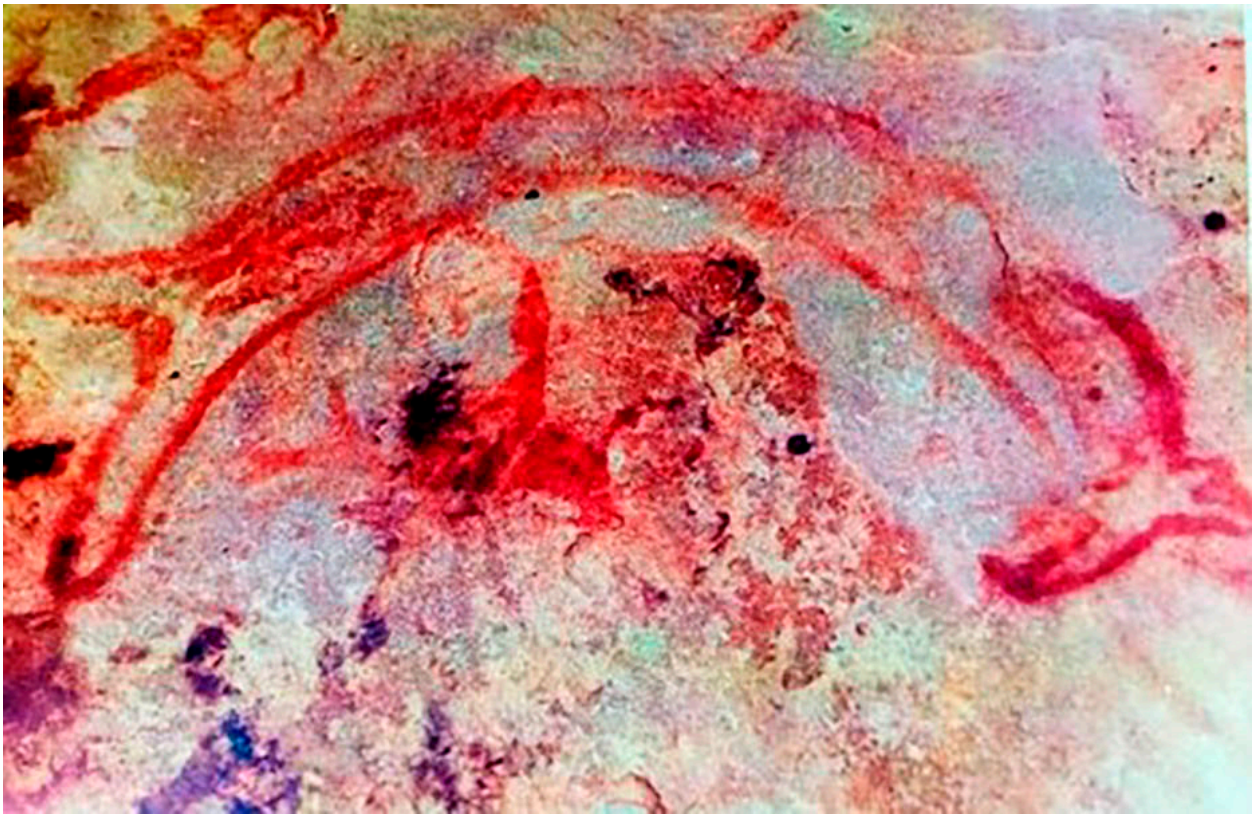
#### Animal and human combined scenes

In some human pregnancy and delivery scenes, the presence of animals is notable, and sometimes human presence is notable in scenes featuring animals. In a few scenes, it seems both are dominating in the scene so, it is difficult to view anyone as the center of the picture. In a painting from Bhimbetka a pregnant woman is depicted in front of a pregnant cow and the woman is pointing to the cow (Kamat 1997) (Fig.15). The anatomy of both is quite accurate and realistic. In the depiction of Mahadev cave in Pachmarhi, the two pregnant women following a horse have some connection with that horse in the scene. They are holding each other's hand and one woman is holding the tail or indicating towards the hind portion of the horse. It seems that all are running in the right direction. In the procession scene of Chaturbhuj Nath where the pregnant woman is carrying some objects on their head, there is also a row of big-horned cattle with or without hump and the row of women have also included men with erected phallus. All are moving in the right direction. This scene seems to be a part of some ritualist procession. In the Lakhma shelter where the pregnant animal is shown with the fully grown fetus, a man is standing in front of it with an erected phallus (Fig. 13). This shows some connection between both creatures. In the hunting scene of Chhibber nala, where only one cow is pregnant in the herd and an archer is shooting an arrow at that pregnant cow from the front and other two archers are behind the herd and not doing any action hunting but carrying the bow and arrow in their hands. In Ladakhi tradition the ibex is considered an important part of the economy and their culture. There are many petroglyphs in Ladakh where ibex is being hunted from behind targeting the genital part and ibex copulating these scenes are reflections of the urge for fertility in pastoral animals for sustaining the economy and survival. Similarly, cattle has been given importance in central and south Indian rock art showing it pregnant. In Karnataka, many erotic/sexual depictions of humans are associated with large humped bulls.

#### Conclusion

There are many pregnancy scenes available in Indian rock art, to collecting and describing each of them is not possible but we have tried





*Figura 13. Pregnant deer leaping, Lakhma rock shelter, Sonbhadra district, Uttar Pradesh (After Tewari, 1990, pl. xv).*



*Figura 14. Ithyphallic man pointing pregnant animal, Lakhma, Sonbhadra (after: Tewari 1990: 34)*





Figura 15. Pregnant woman pointing to pregnant cow, Bhimbetka (Source: <https://www.kamat.com/kalranga/rockpain/betaka.htm>).

to compile some unique pictures of this kind. Thus, if we look at the themes of rock art there will be many aspects to see in one scene. What we see as a hunting scene might be a fertility-related scene or what we see as a human fertility scene might be related to Earth's fertility. Seeing the scenes of childbirth and pregnancy in rock art, we can assume the importance of reproduction and its related ritualistic activities in early societies. The importance of human reproduction scenes might stand for human fertility, reproduction scenes of wild animals for the availability of hunting games, and the reproduction of domestic animals shows the engagement of people with pastoral and cultivation-related activities, here it is important to see the type of domestic animal whether it is useful for pastoralists or cultivation uses. Humans had perceived the animals as an integral part in hunting and agricultural societies so their manifestations always included animals. In the continuation, we can remember the figure on a seal from Harappa, where a plant is growing from the womb of a woman, may symbolize the fertility of the earth (Sullivan 1964) that symbolizes the engagement of Harappan people with agriculture.

The diverse rock art scenes uncovered in this paper offer glimpses into the multifaceted significance of fertility in ancient cultures. Childbirth and pregnancy scenes, whether involving humans or animals, transcend mere artistic expression. They serve as windows into the values, rituals, and societal priorities of bygone eras. The interplay of symbolism in rock art underscores the intricate mental support systems developed by these societies to grapple with the challenges of fertility and reproduction. Viewing these scenes through a holistic lens reveals a nuanced narrative where what might initially appear as a hunting or childbirth scene could be intricately tied to broader themes of fertility, economic prosperity, and the interconnectedness of human and natural worlds. In essence, the rock art narratives of fertility invite us to decipher the rich tapestry of beliefs woven by our ancestors and appreciate the profound significance they attributed to the cycles of life and reproduction.

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