

An appraisal of ladder symbolism with special reference to rock-art

AJIT KUMAR

Symbols, myths and images are the essence of spiritual life. Many of these symbols have hoary antiquity. Deriving the true meaning of these symbols and interpreting it is an arduous task and to do so one has to look behind their current veil and cross refer them between religious text, rituals and figured monuments and semi-veiled allusions.

The ladder is a common symbol found from varied contexts of time and space. The ladder generally is used as prop or a means to ascend heights. It generally has two vertical struts and a series of horizontal rungs. In art, it has been found depicted from prehistoric to modern time. The earliest occurrences are possibly as pictographs and petroglyphs in rock art. They are also noticed in monuments and other material mediums in the form of paintings, engravings, grooving etc. No attempt has been undertaken to study the morphology and meaning of this symbol. During the present study, it was observed that, the ladder motif finds occurrences in religious belief and practices of nearly all religion and is essentially associated with death rituals as symbolic prop for the soul to gain ascendancy to heaven.

In many ancient beliefs the opinion is that, the heaven was much closer to the earth and ascensions were possible from a mountain, ladder or through a tree, clouds, cart, boat or feet or by using sun rays possibly represented in art as arrows. Due to some uncertain calamity the connectivity and proximity between heaven and earth was lost. Some attribute it to the 'tree of Liana' being cut or the mountain touching the sky getting flattened. Special members like shamans it is believed continued to move between the earth and heaven, between human and spirit world using props like ladder, cord, clouds, trees etc., (Eliade 1961:48).

The belief of a mountain/hill and ladder as a possible means or prop to gain access to heaven is very ancient and possibly dates back to prehistoric period. The earliest prehistoric symbolic representation of the ladder possibly reflecting this belief comes from a hill to the west side of Winnemucca Lake sub-basin, Nevada. These petroglyphs according to latest researches are dated between 14.8 and 13.2 ka (between 14,800 and 13,200 and 11, 3000 and 10,500 years ago) (Benson, *et al.* 2013). The ladder petroglyphs are carved right on top of the hills in various forms as an apparent mode or symbol to convey/denote/ access into heaven (Fig. 1). There are many other sites in Nevada where ladder, rakes, concentric circle, grids etc., are common motifs. These motifs are generally located in uninhabited spots and appear to have been created by special practitioners like shamans and have parallels throughout the world. On stylistic consideration they were earlier thought to be dating only between 1000BC and AD1500 (Whitely 1996: 281,242, 233).

In rock art, ladder with two struts connected by rungs and single strut with rungs are found depicted extending into a series of concentric circle/ labyrinth or a sun symbol possibly denoting the heaven or cosmos. In Guanajuato cave in Central Mexico, we have a various representations of ladder like creations one of it reaching out to a sun like representation possibly denoting the cosmos (www.thehistoryblog.com/archives/14394)

(Fig. 2). In the rock art representation in sites of California, Maconkey Ranch, Vernal, Utah also we have Sun motif or cosmos depicted as concentric circles into the centre of which is running a meandering rope or cord like creation (http://rockartblog.blogspot.in/2013_02_01_archive.html) (Fig. 3).



Figure 1. Petroglyphs, Winnemucca Lake, Nevada (Photo Courtesy: Cobb Douglas).



Figure 2. Pictographs-Guanajuato cave, Mexico (Photo Courtesy: www.thehistoryblog.com).



Figure 3. McConkey Ranch, Vernal, Utah (Photo Courtesy: www.rockartblog.blogspot.com)



The earliest historical document defining the concept of ladder in mortuary practices and the solar imagery comes from Egypt. The Pyramid itself was considered as sun's ray to ascend and join the sun (Mieroop 2011: 2). The earliest Pyramid Text from the Old Kingdom (2686-2160 BC) spells the concept of ladder to heaven as "the stairway in order to reach the heights." In the *Book of the Dead* it is stated that 'the ladder is set up that I may see the Gods', 'Gods made him the ladder so that by making use of it he may go up to the heavens'. The hieroglyphic pictograph for the *Stairway to Heaven* was sometimes a single stairway (which was also cast in gold and worn as a charm), or more often a double stairway, as a step pyramid (Eliade 1961: 50). This Stairway to Heaven was constructed by *the Gods of the city of An*-the location of the principal temple of Ra- so that the Gods, could be "united with the above." In Pyramids, Osiris is depicted as ascending into the heaven using a ladder (Fig.4). Many tombs of the archaic and middle dynasties have yielded amulets engraved with ladder or a staircase (Murdock 2008:41; Mieroop 2011: 5). For the ancient Egyptians, the firmament was conceived as close to mountains and it was possible to climb up with a ladder. *The Book of Dead* showed such a "Divine Ladder" sometimes with the Ankh ("Life") sign ♀ symbolically reaching toward the "Celestial Disk" the heaven is conceived as a high tower with a superstructure. This representation looks like a cross on the lower half and in the upper half has a dome representing the cosmos (Sitchin 1980a). The "Gateway to Heaven" is a frequent motif on Mesopotamian cylinder seals. It is depicted as a winged ladder-like gateway leading to the 'Tree of Life' guarded sometimes by Serpents (Fig. 5) (Sitchin 1980b).

This primordial symbolism of the ladder is reflected in Christian and Islamic religious beliefs and literary works. An account in the 28th chapter of the Book of Genesis (28: 10-17), states of how Jacob is revealed in a dream of a large ladder extending from the earth to heaven and ascending and descending from it were gods, angels and men (Pollack 2004: 2). In Islam the Arabic word *mi'raj* is commonly used to signify the ascent of Prophet Muhammad to the heavens using a ladder, according to some sources. In Jerusalem, it is believed that the 'Dome of the Rock' is from where Prophet Muhammad ascended the heaven (Wright 2000: 210). The essence of these stories in the Biblical sources and Islam has great antiquity and has its roots in the Egyptian and Mesopotamian and Persian beliefs prevalent in the Middle East Asian region. The Christian beliefs are represented in paintings and sculptures, as well. There is a painted version in the Lestnitsa Manuscript from Russia datable to the 16th century now in the NYPL Spencer collection depicting the theme (Fig. 6). A sculpture version of the ladder with angels ascending it occurs on the west front of Bath Abbey, England (Fig. 7).

In Indian rock art, the ladder motif occurs as pictographs and petroglyphs and as graffiti on pots. The ladder motif along at times with a crossed circle adjoining it has been reported as graffiti on Megalithic/ early historic pottery. The sites of Kodumanal, Tamil Nadu has yielded some (Rajan and Boppearachchi 2002: 102-103) (Figs. 8 and 9).

In Africa, the Akan funerary 'family pots' are ornamented with the so called 'ladder of death' which not only symbolizes the transition from life to death but also illustrated the African proverb 'it is only one man

who climbs the ladder of death', which underscores the universality associated with death (Werness 2003: 177). It is interesting to note that the ladder depiction from the in Kodumanal pots, though broken indicates the possibility of having had seven rungs and apparently intentional.

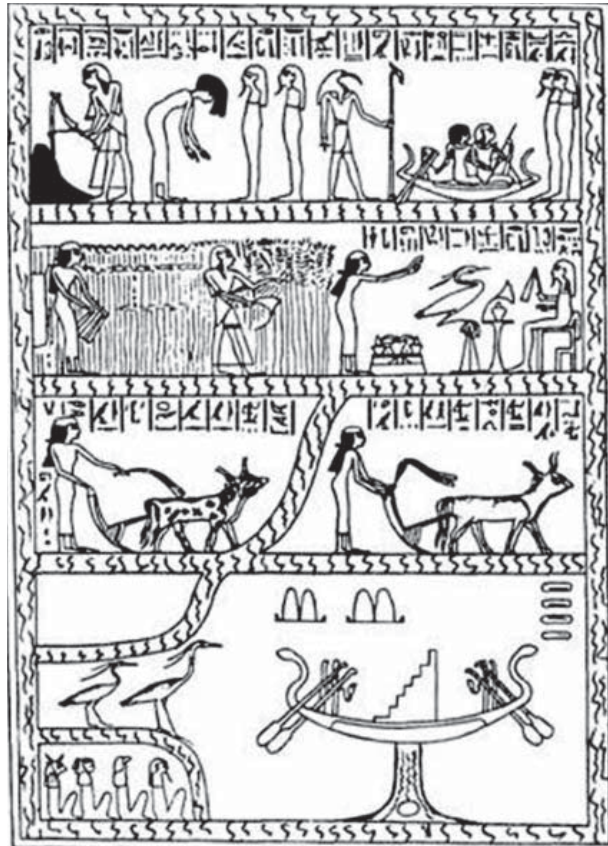


Figure 4. Stairway to heaven (of Osiris) (Photo Courtesy: www.bibilotecapleyades.net).

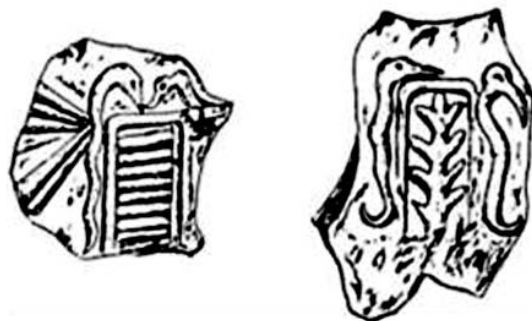


Figure 5. Tree of life: Mesopotamia (Photo Courtesy www.bibilotecapleyades.net).

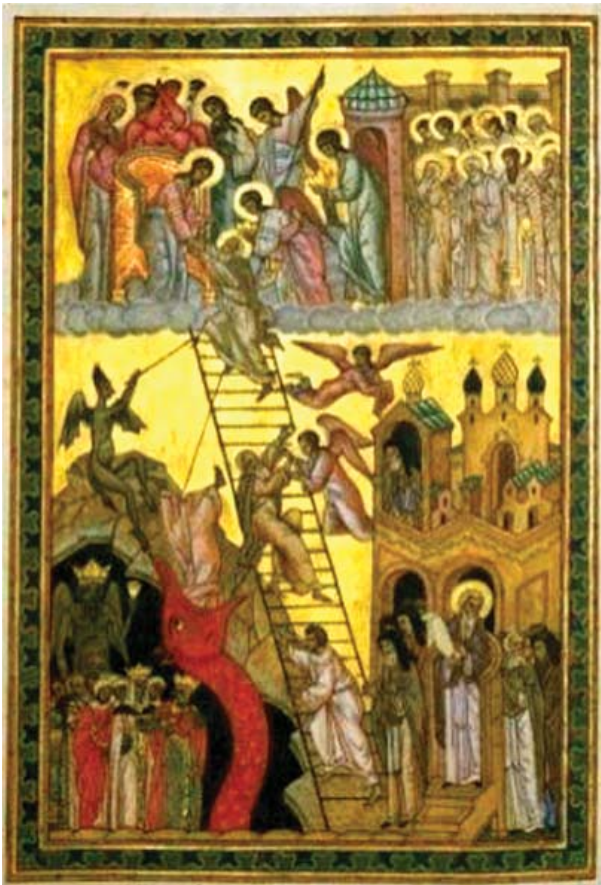


Figure 6. Lestnitsa Manuscript (Photo Courtesy www.thelivingmoon.com).



Figure 7. Ladder, Bath Abbey (Photo Courtesy: www.satnavandcider.worldpress.com).



Figure 8. Ladder motif-Kodumanal (Photo Courtesy: K.Rajan).



Figure 9. Ladder motif-Kodumanal (Photo Courtesy: K.Rajan).

The ladder with seven rungs seems to have had some special significance in some religious beliefs and burial rites. In Orphic and Mithraic tradition there is copious reference to use of ladder. In the primeval Roman tradition, bronze ladders were placed in graves to facilitate souls to ascend heaven. In the Mithraic tradition reference to ceremonial ladder with seven steps made of seven metals as a mode to be uplifted through the seven heavens to the ultimate heaven finds occurrence (Cumont 2006: 153-154; Eliade 1961: 48-49). It has been observed that the Russian of Voronezh, bake dough ladders with seven rungs to honour their dead (Pratt 2007: 434).

The pictographic representation of the ladder

occurs from many sites in India. There are representations of ladder motifs reaching out to the sun, ladder with cross marks at the bottom and at the top, there is also ladder motif leading into labyrinths or atop with shamans. The motif of a ladder with series of rungs leading to the sun comes from Alaikkalu, in the Palani hills Tamil Nadu (Fig. 10). It is interesting to note that an almost similar motif is found in the Chumash rock art sites of S. California, USA, thousands of kilometres away (Figs. 11 and 12). At Alaikkalu, the sun is denoted as a circle with rays emanating from it, in white and red colour and with a median spot and a series of rungs again demarcated in red and white run up to the sun symbol as in the Sun symbol in



Figure 10. Alaikkalu, Palani hills (Photo Courtesy: R.N.Kumaran).



Figure 11. Sketch of sun symbol (Photo Courtesy: www.thelivingmoon.com).



Figure 12. Chumash rock art site S. California (Photo Courtesy: David Stillman).

the California site, the only difference being, at the latter site it is solely done in red colour. This representation attests the fact that primeval ethnic communities all over the world seem to have shared common strains in their belief in after life and ascend to heaven.

In the pictograph from a shelter in Palani hills called Pakkialai, there is a ladder in white with seven rungs and at the bottom and top are cross marks each (Kumaran and Saranya 2009: 44). The cross at the bottom is larger and the top smaller, as though to denote or impart the perceptive of the distance traversed by the soul to space or heaven (Fig. 13). It is interesting to note that the ladder depiction from the pottery and paintings from Tamil Nadu seem to have seven rungs as if it was attuned to the belief of seven heavens (Stein 1987: 185).

In the Indian sub-continent, a shelter from Kaferi Samasta, CharoonDara, in Kukrai village of Swat Valley, Pakistan contains pictographs of ladder with seven steps and an anthropomorphic figure on the topmost rung (Fig. 14). This ladder is described as an 'irregular structure of a stupa', however no characters of a structural stupa is noticeable in this representation and hence the possibility of it being a ladder and the anthropomorphic figure on top being a shaman gains credence (Sardar 2012: 4-5).

Petroglyphs in Edakkal shelter, in Kerala, has a few representations of a ladder and at the far end of each of them are hazy anthropomorphic figures, as though denoting the soul/spirit/ shaman, ascending the heaven or realm of the gods and ancestors above (Fig. 15) (Kumar 2013) quite like example from Kaferi Smasta, Swat. There is a belief that shaman in their state of trance experience the feel of climbing up a ladder to the realm of the gods so as to find some power or object to battle the spirits, who have captured the soul of the sick (Pollack 2004: 2). In primeval beliefs, sickness is often attributed to evil spirits capturing the body rather than microbial infections. Dating these figures are tricky, however it can be assumed that the Edakkal engravings at least date to the 5th-6th century BC.

During the 8th-7th cent BC this belief of ladder connecting the earth and heaven was prevalent in the Indian Brahmanical ethos. In the *Satapata Brahmana* (Sat. Br. V, 2, 1, 9) there are reference to the use of pillar and ladder to reach heaven to become immortal and in *Taittiriya Samhita* (Tat. Sam. VI,6,4,2) there is a reference which speaks of the sacrificer making a ladder and bridge to reach himself to the celestial world (cited by Eliade 1952: 44-45).

This belief of ladder is reflected in Buddhist and Jain beliefs too. Buddha is believed to have descended at Sankisa from the Trayastrinsas heaven after delivering sermons to the Devas and his mother Mayadevi. He had reached heaven in three steps but Sakara/Indra the god of heavens decides to give him a befitting return and hence constructed a ladder extending from Mahameru to Sakapura or Sankissa, hence also called Sankissa ladder. There are different versions of the story and the material of which the ladder was made, but generally considered to be of precious metals like gold and jewels (Cunningham 1998: 91-93). This story is sculptured in early Buddhist sites of Barhut, Sanchi, and Gandhara all of



Figure 13. Ladder motif- Pakkialai, Palani hills, Tamil Nadu (Photo Courtesy: R.N.Kumaran).



which is datable to 1st century. AD (Fig. 16).

Ethno-archaeological observations of the continuity of structural ladder in burial rituals

There have been reports from various places in the world of full sized and small sized ladders being placed in/on graves to assist souls in their heavenly ascent (Werness 2003: 117). The primitive Asian tribes of Lolos and the Karens set up ritual ladder upon tombs to enable the deceased to ascend the heaven (Eliade 1961: 50).

Some pristine communities like Lepcha of Sikkim use a ladder element in their funerary ceremonies. They construct a stone wall around the burial ground and wooden ladders are placed leaning onto walls, as though to let the soul ascend the leave the bounded enclosure (Sharma 2013: 67). Among the Madias tribe of Maharashtra, a carrier made of wood or bamboo, which looks like a ladder is used to carry the dead to the grave and they also have megalithic practices (Kulkarni 2002: 108). Similarly the Kadars tribes in the Anamali hills also have megalithic practices and use a ladder like carrier to transport the body of dead to the burial site and they leave it over the burial mound (Fig. 17). Similar ladders are also observed in rock paintings of the Anamali hills (Benny Kurian, personal communication, 15.10.2012).

There is one pictograph from Onake Kindi/Chik Rampur, near Anegeudi on the left bank of Tungabhadra river in Karnataka state, which could be a representation of a megalithic stone circle or labyrinth with a dead human represented within it and a ladder motif running through it (Sundara 2006: 42-45). This pictograph recalls the placement of a ladder over the tombs for the soul to ascend the heavens (Fig. 18).

A ladder like stretcher in bamboo or wood is used by Hindus to carry the dead to the cremation Ghats in Banaras; however none recall the significance or meaning of its use (Fig. 19).

In India, as a continuity of tradition, the Jain community in certain parts of north India as part of the naming ceremony of the male great grandchild have a golden ladder placed on the toe of the great grandparents as to honour and respect their age and also covertly remind them to ready themselves for the heavenly journey, any moment from then (Fig. 20). In a period when mortality rate was high and life expectancy low, to have survived to become great grandfather was no small a social achievement. Hence, the ceremonies were in a way to honouring the aged and also remind them gently of the future in store for them (personal communication Nirmal Jain, 13.07.2012).

Tree as a ladder to heaven

The second mode of ascending the heaven was using a tree ladder. It also

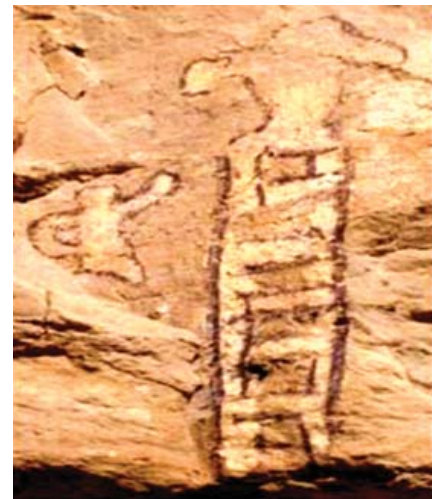


Figure 14. Kaferi Smasta, Swat (Photo Courtesy: Badshah Sardar).



Figure 15. Ladder motif, Edakkal, Kerala.

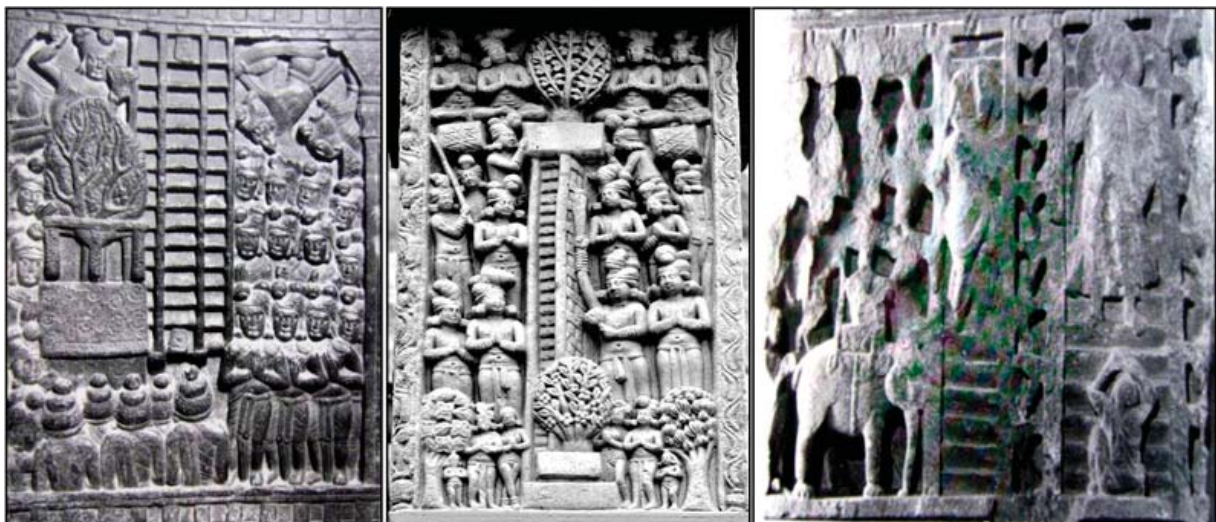


Figure 16. Sankisa Ladder motif from Barhut, Sanchi and Mathura.



Figure 17. Ladder like carrier of the Kadars (Photo Courtesy: Benny Kurian).



Figure 20. Jain golden ladder ritual (Photo Courtesy: Nirmal Jain).



Figure 18. Ladder placed within a megalithic stone circle/labyrinth, Anegudi/Chik Rampur, Photo courtesy Srikumar.M.Menon.



Figure 19. Ladder like stretcher/carrier of Hindus at Varanasi.

happens to be the widely distributed variant of the symbolism of the cosmic tree which is believed to be situated in the middle of the universe. In Vedic India, ancient China and Germanic mythology as well as in the 'primitive' religions they have version of the cosmic tree whose root plunged down to the hell and whose branches reached heaven (Eliade 1961: 44). Giant trees were means for people to leave the surface of the earth. So the trees become a ladder to climb to sky or heaven to encounter the divine. A tree thus became a connecting factor between physical matter of the earth below and the metaphysical heaven above and on which the very existence of man was based and hence also called the 'tree of life' (Pollack 2004: 3-5). This existence of a tree or a tree trunk as a ladder to heaven was prevalent in the beliefs among the Caucasus, Tibetans and Koryaks ethnic groups (Stein 1987: 188).

The earliest concept of tree ladder possibly finds representation in the Western Nevada rock art (Fig. 21). Here the vertical stalk or stem has seven to nine lateral stalks or branches issuing from it. Variety of these apparent tree ladder symbols occurs in the petroglyphs from Nevada. As already stated some of these petroglyphs from Winnemucca Lake, Nevada are dated between

10,500 and 14,800 years before (Benson *et al.* 2013).

The tree ladder could be depicted with tiers like a stair or with branches or foliates issuing from a vertically running stem along the walls which may also contain motifs like crosses, sun etc. The gateway to heaven was frequent motif on near eastern cylindrical seals and was depicted as a winged ladder like gateway leading to the 'tree of life'. In Sumerian beliefs the gateway to heaven was marked by date palms. In Israel, the Almond tree was denoted as the 'tree of life' (Figs. 22 and 23) (Pollack 2004: 5). In certain other beliefs, the birch tree or its wood became associated with the ladder to heaven (Sitchin 1980b).

In India, the tree ladder to heaven possibly finds representation in petroglyphs and pictographs from the Himalayan/Tibetan regions. Petroglyphs from a boulder in Leh have the representation of a tree. Adjoining the tree to the left is circle with possibly a dead person in representation and above it a cross mark again possibly denoting the dead (Fig. 24). The swastika marks on the boulder is also observed to anticlockwise direction. Hence, the circumstantial association of the tree with other dead symbols lends the possibility of the representation being a tree ladder to heaven. It is interesting to note that like the



Figure 21. Tree ladder- Wineemucca Lake, West Nevada (Photo courtesy: <http://www.nevadarockart.info>).



Figure 22. Sumerian gateway to heaven (Photo Courtesy: www.ufo-contact.com).

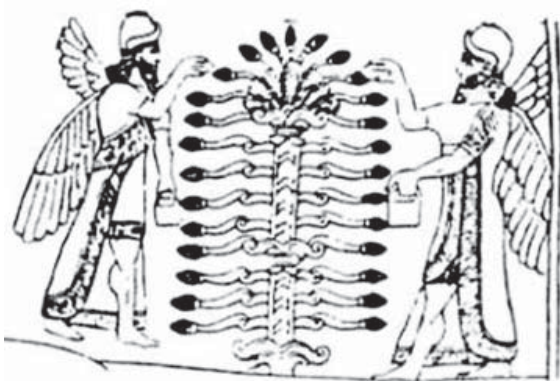


Figure 23. Sumerian gateway to heaven (Photo Courtesy: www.ufo-contact.com).



Figure 24. Tree ladder-Ladakh (Photo Courtesy: Laurianne Bruneau).



Figure 25. The comic tree, Tibet (Photo Courtesy: David Germano).

Nevada tree ladder, this example from Leh also contain seven to nine rungs or branches. In a pictograph from Upper Tibet region documented by David Germano (2010), a large tree is shown extending to the heaven or cosmos denoted by the sun and moon symbols (Fig. 25). The Sun and moon symbols attest that the tree represented in the paintings is the tree ladder to heaven or the 'tree of life' reaching into the heaven.

It is believed that the cosmic tree has seven to nine branches. These seven or nine branches are supposed to denote the seven planetary heavens or celestial planes. The Tatar or Siberian shaman symbolises his accession to heaven by climbing a ritual tree and in the process cutting 7/9 notches. Ascending the tree he describes to onlookers his view at each stage. At the 6th step he worships the

moon and in the 7th the sun and at the 9th he prostrates himself before Bai Ulgan, the supreme being and offers him the soul of a horse that has been sacrificed. It is interesting to note that the tree representation from west Nevada and on the boulder in Leh/Ladakh has 7/9 rungs or branches. Many of the sacred or ritual trees planted on burial or cremation spots, or that we meet in religious history are imperfect copies of the cosmic tree (Eliade 1961: 44-45). In Kerala, some of the Hindu communities at the place of cremation, plant a coconut tree towards the head side, a plantain tree at the navel and a yam towards the feet side even now and possibly is a continuity of ancient sepulchral belief and practices.

Feet and rope as means to ascend heaven

There is a bruised representation of possibly a shaman or a dead person depicted on a rock ledge atop a hill at Bellary, in Karnataka, brought to my notice by Yongjun Kim (Fig.26). This figure lies prostrate or in shava asana. He possibly is shown ascending towards heaven in some shamanistic mission placing his right foot first. Beneath this right foot is the symbolic demarcation of feet which is depicted in pairs moving up along his right and rising above his head. The shaman also possible descends after his mission accomplished and this is possibly denoted by the feet etched and demarcated to the left of the figure. There is also a rope or creeper like element towards the right of the figure and it has already



Figure 26. Shamanistic figure from Bellary, Karnataka (Photo Courtesy: Yongjun Kim).

been observed Shamans use rope or cord also as means to ascend heaven and here possibly was an added aid in the shaman's ascendance (Eliade 1952: 48).

Concluding observation

No semantic and hermeneutic appraisal of ancient symbols can be treated as final as it is impossible to read into the intangible beliefs and the mind of its creators. Symbols never get obliterated from human psyche. Their aspects may change and their functions over time may become disguised or degraded and to understand their true meaning one has to look behind their latest masks. Every human being past or present alludes to the immortality after death. Death initiatory or not is the supreme case of a rupture of the planes. Ladder carries it with a rich symbolism without ceasing to be perfectly coherent. Ladder gives a plastic expression to the break through the planes necessitated by passage from one mode of being to another by placing us in the cosmological point where communication between heaven, earth and hell becomes possible. This is why the stairway and the ladder play an important part in the rites and myths connected with initiation and funerary rituals (Eliade 1952).

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Ajit Kumar
Head, Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala

K a r i a v a t t o m . P . O ,
Trivandrum-695581
Email: ajitkumarku@gmail.com

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