



E-ISSN: 2976-2421
CODEN: JRAOCQ

Journal of Rock Art (JRA)

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.65098/jra.01.2026.44.54>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Samsāra in Symbols: Visual Representations of Birth-death Cycles in Vindhyan Region

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History:

Received 05 Feb 2026

Accepted 17 Mar 2026

Available online 30 May 2026

Online Article Code



ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the symbolic representation of the birth-death-rebirth cycle in the rock art of the Vindhyan region of central India. Adopting an interdisciplinary framework that integrates archaeology, art history, Indian philosophical traditions, and symbolic analysis, the study examines visual motifs associated with fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, and cyclical cosmology documented at several rock art sites across the Vindhyan and Kaimur Ranges. Particular attention is given to recurring geometric motifs, especially the *plus-in-circle* symbol, which appears in association with human figures and ritual scenes.

The analysis combines archaeological documentation of rock art imagery with comparative iconographic study and limited ethnographic parallels, situating these motifs within broader symbolic traditions of South Asia and other cultural contexts. Rather than asserting a direct doctrinal continuity between early imagery and later philosophical systems, the study cautiously explores whether these visual forms may reflect early cosmological perceptions concerning life, regeneration, and the cyclical nature of existence.

By examining the intersection of visual symbolism, ritual imagery, and cultural memory, the paper suggests that certain motifs in Vindhyan rock art may represent proto-cosmological expressions of cyclical existence, concepts that later found more systematic articulation in Indian philosophical traditions. The study, therefore, contributes to ongoing debates on the interpretation of prehistoric symbolic systems and highlights the potential of rock art as a medium through which early communities articulated ideas about life, death, and renewal.

KEYWORDS

Samsāra, Symbols, Birth, Death, Semiotics, Rock Art, Ethnography

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of *samsāra*, the cyclical journey of birth, death, and rebirth, forms a foundational principle in Hindu philosophy. *Karma*, originating from the Sanskrit root word *kri* meaning "to do", refers to the idea that a person's actions have consequences in this life as well as in the life after. Governed by the law of *Karma*, this cycle is not merely a metaphysical construct but a dynamic reality embedded in religious thought, ritual practices, and symbolic representation. While sacred ancient texts like the Upaniṣads, Purāṇas, and epics such as the Rāmayaṇa and Māhābhārata elaborate on *samsāra* and the path to *mokṣa*, i.e., liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth, prehistoric and protohistoric communities expressed these beliefs through powerful visual symbolism. This paper explores how early humans in the Vindhyan region of Central India internalized and communicated the idea of *samsāra* through rock art and associated material culture.

Sites like Bhimbetka, Sitakhardi, and Kaimur feature vivid rock paintings and motifs, such as the plus-in-circle symbol, childbirth scenes, anthropomorphic figures, and phallic or womb-like shapes, that convey themes of fertility, transformation, death, and transcendence. These images are not mere decorations but symbolic vessels, linking

material life with the sacred and the eternal. The study also considers complementary forms such as punch-marked coins and architecture from sites like Kaushambi and Sanchi, where similar symbols persist, suggesting a continuity of meaning across centuries. The research questions of the paper are: How are themes of birth, fertility, death, and rebirth visually represented in Vindhyan rock art? Can recurring symbols such as the plus-in-circle motif be interpreted in relation to cosmological ideas like *samsāra*? And to what extent do ethnographic and textual parallels help interpret prehistoric visual symbolism?

The study proposes that prehistoric rock art of the Vindhyan region functioned as a form of visual theology through which early communities expressed cosmological ideas related to life, death, and rebirth. This study does not claim direct doctrinal continuity between prehistoric imagery and later Hindu philosophy but explores symbolic parallels that may reflect early cosmological perceptions concerning life, death, and regeneration. In a broader context, the paper draws parallels with global traditions of ascension and the afterlife, such as the ladders to heaven found in Indian, Biblical, and Islamic narratives, indicating a cross-cultural archetype of spiritual ascent. By examining the interplay between symbol, myth, and cosmology, this paper positions rock art as a sacred cartography, a visual theology of the soul's journey. Ultimately,

this study argues that symbolic representation was central to ancient understanding, allowing pre-literate societies to engage with complex metaphysical ideas. Through the enduring language of symbols, early cultures articulated a profound vision of *samsāra* that continues to inform cultural imagination today (Singh, 2023). The dating discussed in the research paper is based on a relative dating methodology.

2. HISTORIOGRAPHY OF INDIAN ROCK ART

The study of rock art in India has developed progressively since the nineteenth century. The first recorded discovery was made by A. C. L. Carlisle in 1867 near Sohagi Ghat, which initiated scholarly attention toward prehistoric paintings in the subcontinent. Subsequent decades witnessed increasing documentation and exploration, particularly during the mid-twentieth century, with the pioneering work of V. S. Wakankar, whose discovery of the Bhimbetka rock shelters significantly advanced Indian rock art studies. Later contributions by scholars such as Yashodhar Mathpal and Erwin Neumayer further expanded methodological approaches, including stylistic analysis, regional surveys, and contextual interpretation. In recent decades, research has increasingly incorporated interdisciplinary perspectives and scientific documentation techniques, contributing to a more systematic understanding of rock art traditions in South Asia (Tiwary, 2022).

3. CONCEPT OF SAṂSĀRA IN INDIAN THOUGHT

In Hindu philosophy, life and death are viewed not as linear events but as interconnected stages within a greater cosmic cycle governed by the laws of *karma* (action and consequence) and *samsāra* (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth). This worldview is deeply rooted in the roles of the divine trinity, Lord Brahmā as the Creator, Lord Viṣṇu as the Preserver, and Lord Śiva as the Destroyer, who together orchestrate the eternal rhythm of existence. The ancient Purāṇas reiterate this concept, describing how the soul transitions through 8.4 million life forms before attaining the rare opportunity of a human birth. Being born human is considered the highest state because it allows the individual to seek spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*), the ultimate freedom from the cycle of *samsāra*. According to this principle, every individual is the architect of their destiny, and the quality of one's rebirth is influenced by the intentions and deeds performed in previous lives (Bhatia, 2025). The Vedic worldview initially emphasized *ṛta*, the natural and moral order, which laid the foundation for the doctrine of *karma* and *samsāra*. Later, the *Upaniṣads* deepened this perspective by stressing the impermanence and inherent suffering of worldly existence (Ghosh, 2010). These philosophical ideas, while primarily expressed in sacred texts, also found visual and symbolic expression in pre-literate societies. Motifs such as the wheel, circle, or plus-in-circle symbol became metaphors for the soul's journey, cosmic order, or the cycle of life and death.

4. SYMBOLISM AND SEMIOTICS IN PREHISTORIC EXPRESSION

The term symbol originates from the Greek word meaning "to throw together," which captures the essence of how human beings connect tangible objects or images with deeper, often abstract, meanings. A symbol is much more than a sign or mark; it is a powerful medium that transforms the physical into a representation of the spiritual, emotional, or conceptual. This capacity to use shapes, forms, or natural elements to express ideas has been at the heart of human culture since the beginning of civilization. Symbolism, therefore, refers to the practice or process of attributing symbolic meanings to objects, forms, or actions (Ivanov & Thomas, 1966). It is a way for individuals and communities to give visual or material expression to concepts that are otherwise difficult to define, such as time, life, death, divinity, or the cosmos. Through this symbolic process, cultures make sense of their world and pass down their values, beliefs, and traditions from one generation to the next.

Symbols do not carry universal meanings, cultural, religious, and historical contexts shape their significance. As anthropologist Mari Womack explains, the meaning of a symbol is arbitrary and culturally assigned. What one culture might interpret as a symbol of peace,

another may understand as a sign of conflict. Yet, there often appears to be a logical or intuitive link between a symbol and what it represents (Womack, 2005). This perceived connection is usually based on metaphor, where the symbol resembles the qualities of the concept it signifies, or metonymy, where the symbol is linked by association or proximity to the idea it represents. For instance, water is frequently used to symbolize purification or renewal because of its cleansing nature in real life. Similarly, fire may symbolize transformation or destruction due to its powerful, visible effects (Tiwary, 2013).

Carl Jung adds an essential psychological dimension to symbolism by highlighting that humans possess an innate drive to assign symbolic meaning to the world around them. This tendency often functions unconsciously and is seen across dreams, myths, religious practices, and works of art. Jung believed that symbolic expression allows individuals to communicate inner experiences and universal human concerns that transcend verbal language. Thus, symbols are not only cultural tools but also psychological instruments that help individuals process emotions, confront existential questions, and connect with something greater than themselves (Jung & Franz, 1964).

In art and literature, symbolism becomes a deliberate method of representation. Writers, painters, and sculptors use symbols to convey deeper meanings behind their works. A rose, for example, may represent love or beauty, while a broken mirror might suggest a shattered identity or the distortion of truth. In such contexts, symbolism adds layers of meaning, prompting viewers or readers to engage intellectually with what they see or read (Mohan et al., 2019). According to Webster's Dictionary (1989), symbolism in art involves a dual focus: the immediate image or story being presented and the abstract concept that it is meant to represent. It goes beyond aesthetic appreciation and encourages interpretation and reflection. Likewise, the Oxford Dictionary (2001) defines symbolism as the use of symbols to represent ideas or the process of attributing symbolic meanings to objects and natural elements.

In the field of cultural studies, symbolism is essential for understanding how societies visualize their core beliefs and communicate them through ritual, imagery, and language. Cultures across the world use symbols, whether in the form of idols, drawings, colours, architectural forms, or elements of nature, to represent their understanding of life, divinity, morality, and the universe (Womack, 2005). These symbols often become sacred or iconic. For example, in Indian culture, the lotus flower symbolizes purity and spiritual awakening. The plus-in-circle motif, widely found in ancient rock art across India and other parts of the world, may represent the cycle of life, the four directions, or a cosmic order. Such symbols help to connect the material with the metaphysical, offering a visual language through which intangible beliefs are communicated and preserved (Tiwary, 2013).

Ultimately, symbolism plays a foundational role in shaping human culture. It transforms simple sensory experiences into tools for meaning-making. Every symbol reflects not just an idea but also the worldview of the community that created it. There is no entirely objective or neutral way to interpret the world. Every culture filters experience through the symbolic systems it has inherited and developed. Thus, whenever we engage with a symbol, whether in art, language, ritual, or landscape, we are also engaging with a larger network of cultural memory and identity. Symbolism has allowed human beings to build bridges between thought and expression, between the seen and the unseen. This symbolic dimension of culture is not fixed or static. It is dynamic and evolving, offering endless opportunities for reinterpretation, creativity, and deeper understanding.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

Indian rock art studies have a long scholarly tradition beginning with the pioneering work of V. S. Wakankar and continuing through scholars like Yashodhar Mathpal, Erwin Neumayer, and Meenakshi Dubey-Pathak. Wakankar's documentation of Bhimbetka in the 1950s brought to global attention the antiquity and depth of Indian prehistoric art. Mathpal (1984) further contextualized this material, identifying ritualistic and social narratives within the rock shelters. Neumayer (2011) critically reassessed prevailing interpretations and emphasized the symbolic

richness of painted figures, particularly concerning gender and ritual.

Studies focusing on symbolism in Indian visual culture, such as those by Tiwary (2013), Kumar (2016), Singh and Tiwary (2018; 2025), have highlighted the presence of non-figurative motifs like the plus-in-circle and anthropomorphic forms as carriers of deeper metaphysical meaning. These works reveal how early Indian societies used visual signs to express beliefs about fertility, death, cosmic order, and transformation. Despite these advances, the specific symbolic articulation of *saṃsāra* remains underexplored, especially in terms of gendered and ritual imagery. This study attempts to fill that gap by offering an interpretive framework that links symbolism with Indian religious cosmology.

6. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a multidisciplinary methodology that integrates archaeological site analysis, iconographic interpretation, and cultural comparison. Primary data sources include documented rock art panels from the Vindhyan region (notably Bhimbetka, Pachmarhi, Kaimur, Panchmukhi, and Chaturbhujnath Nala), cross-referenced with published research, field notes, and photographic archives. The analysis adopts a semiotic approach to identify and interpret key symbols (e.g., plus-in-circle, tridents, ladder motifs), situating them within a philosophical and cultural framework drawn from Vedic, Purāṇic, and Upaniṣadic texts. Comparative mythology is employed to correlate symbolic expressions found in Indian rock art with analogous motifs in global religious traditions, such as Jacob's Ladder or the Trimurti. This allows for a deeper understanding of universal archetypes and their localized representations.

Ethnographic parallels, particularly the persistence of ancestor worship and fertility rituals in contemporary tribal communities of the Vindhyan region, further inform the interpretations. The goal is to treat the visual content not merely as artistic material but as repositories of spiritual and cosmological insight. Overall, the methodological framework is divided into five different points: Archaeological Documentation, Iconographic Analysis, Semiotic Interpretation, Ethnographic Comparison, and Textual Correlation.

7. VINDHYAN REGION: GEOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The Vindhyan region is the ancient superstructure that forms a large chunk of the Indian mainland. The Vindhyan basin is bounded on the west by the Aravalli Mountains along the Great Boundary Fault, continuing uninterrupted beneath the Gangetic alluvial plain beyond the present northern outcrop limit, below the Deccan Traps in the southwest, and the Bijawar Group borders the southeast margin of the basin (Ray & Chakraborty, 2006). The Vindhya region covers the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar.

One of the most compelling examples of symbolic expression can be found in the rock art of the Vindhyan Range in central India, where prehistoric communities depicted key moments of the human life cycle, particularly birth and death, through symbolic forms. These rock shelters, located across regions like Kaimur, Mirzapur, and Chambal Valley, contain images and motifs that reflect the spiritual and existential concerns of early humans. Symbols such as the plus-in-circle, which appear frequently in these rock art sites, are often interpreted as representations of the life cycle, cosmic balance, or the four cardinal directions (Tiwary, 2013). In several shelters of the Vindhyan hills, this symbol is painted near scenes of warfare or rituals, suggesting a close link with death and commemorative practices. In the rock art of Kabra Pahar (Raigarh), Sitakhardi in Chambal Valley, and Edakkal and Marayoor in Kerala, the plus-in-circle appears in association with tridents, a symbol commonly linked to Lord Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction and regeneration. Its placement near war scenes or funerary depictions implies that these symbols may have served as spiritual markers, meant to honor the dead or ensure transition into the afterlife (Singh & Tiwary, 2018; Tiwary, 2022). These symbols, painted in shades of red and ochre, convey not only reverence for those who had passed

but also a belief in the cyclical nature of existence, where death is not an end but a step in a larger cosmic rhythm.

8. VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF LIFE IN ROCK ART

From a scientific point of view, life is a biological process characterised by other processes such as metabolism, growth, reproduction, and response to stimuli. Scientifically, there is no innate purpose to it—we came into being by natural selection and suitable environmental conditions. However, humans are not just content with survival; we seek meaning. From this urge arises a deeper interpretation of life that sees it as a community, in harmony and goal-oriented. In Hinduism, for instance, life is considered a perpetual cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, to fulfil one's duty or karma and attain liberation or moksha (Flood, 1996). In this view, childbirth is not only a biological process but a spiritual re-entry, a passage in the soul's journey through existence.

This spiritual passage is marked by *saṃskāra*, which is a series of sacred rites that sacralise the key transitions in life (Kane, 1941). There are sixteen *saṃskāra* according to tradition, among which is *Garbhādhāna*—the private rite of passage with the intent to have a child—and *Jātakarman*, the ritual performed at childbirth, which symbolizes the purification and integration of the newborn into both the family and the larger cosmic order. Thus, childbirth is not just a family event but a social and philosophical occasion. The child is seen as both an individual and a continuation of traditions, linking them to their ancestors.

Womanhood and birth are closely intertwined experiences—it symbolizes the cycle of life and is the very core of human society. Womanhood and motherhood are often linked to one another, and many cultures to this day measure a woman's worth by her ability to bear children. Philosophically speaking, this association becomes an acknowledgement of the woman as the originator of life. Birth, therefore, signifies more than the start of a new life; it signifies beginnings and the creative force of nature.

The many motifs of pregnancy and childbirth across cultures reflect a more profound understanding. They illustrate a basic human desire: to continue one's legacy. Procreation is not just a biological act; it carries significant social and moral implications. Different cultures view the act of procreation as vital for preserving lineage, cultural identity, and often link it to the fertility of the land and the well-being of the people. Fertility rituals, goddess worship, and practices for safe pregnancy exemplify how societies emphasize the importance of childbirth. These rituals represent *saṃsāra* in that they mark key transitions and ensure these are not only experienced but also sanctified and remembered.

Despite this centrality in life, direct depictions of pregnancy and childbirth are rare in rock art. The Vindhyan Range, known for its many rock art sites, provides enough evidence of communal life and symbolic representation. However, portrayals of childbirth are not as common (Singh & Tiwary, 2023). This absence from the paintings might be an indicator of the sacredness and privacy surrounding the act, or even a cultural tendency to represent such important events through symbolic forms rather than direct representation.

Yet where it does appear, the paintings are rich and suggestive. *Garbhādhāna* is the first *saṃskāra*, and it is hardly depicted in rock art. The word *Garbha* means the womb, and *Garbhādhāna* is one of the Vedic Ṣoḍaśa *saṃskāra* or 16 rituals that span from before the birth of the child to the end of their lifespan. *Garbhādhāna* is the method for producing a child of innate qualities. *saṃskāra* are sacred Hindu rites of passage, rituals, and sacraments performed to purify the soul, mind, and body, marking key life milestones from pre-conception to cremation. A copulating scene has been recognised from the ceiling of Bhonrawali Shelter II F-5 in Raisen District, Madhya Pradesh (Mathpal, 1998). The lack of such paintings suggests that this might have been considered a private, sacred act not meant for the public eye or that its depiction was a social taboo. Group scenes can be seen where women are shown as stick-like forms with large abdomens, suggesting pregnancy. The female figure forms the central part of the group scene. The placement of the pregnant woman at the centre of these scenes indicates her importance.

Some paintings show women in a squatting posture with legs spread, suggesting a birthing position. She is often accompanied by other figures, infants, men in celebratory poses, or individuals surrounding her in what may be midwifery or ritual settings. Such a scene can be found in the paintings of Panchmukhi in the Sonbhadra district of Uttar Pradesh (Figure 1). A human figure (woman) can be seen with stretched legs and a circular object protruding from her womb. Another figure is depicted below her as if to hold the baby. More female figures appear in the same rock shelter, indicating that this was not an isolated narrative but part of a broader symbolic representation.

We also find domestic scenes where pregnancy is shown. In Lakhajoar (Raisen district, Madhya Pradesh) (Figure 2), we see a family sitting inside a hut. A man, a woman (depicted with breasts), and a child are all taking meals, and the woman is shown in X-ray style with an object in her belly. This object has been interpreted as a part of the meal by Neumayer (Neumayer, 2011). However, other interpretations have suggested it as a baby in the woman, given the fact that only the woman

is shown in an X-ray style (Singh & Tiwary, 2023; Singh & Tiwary, 2025). The entire scene not only focuses on the nearing birth but also on family life and the continuity of traditions.

Table 1 lists other scenes where pregnant women are depicted as part of larger collective movements. From Chaturbhujnath Nala Shelter No. 81 (Mandsaur District, Madhya Pradesh), we see a large convoy of men, women, and cattle depicted in which women are shown pregnant. Both men and women are seen carrying some objects. Women are carrying some objects on their heads. Men are also carrying kanwar (loads hanging from both ends of a stick carried over the shoulders) on their shoulders. A few ithyphallic men in the front row are holding the horns of cattle. This could suggest certain ritualistic practices associated with fertility and a safe pregnancy.

In the rock shelters of Mirzapur and Sonbhadra, we find a few X-ray style paintings of animals with foetuses inside their bellies. Here, the focus is placed on the animal, making it the central figure rather than the

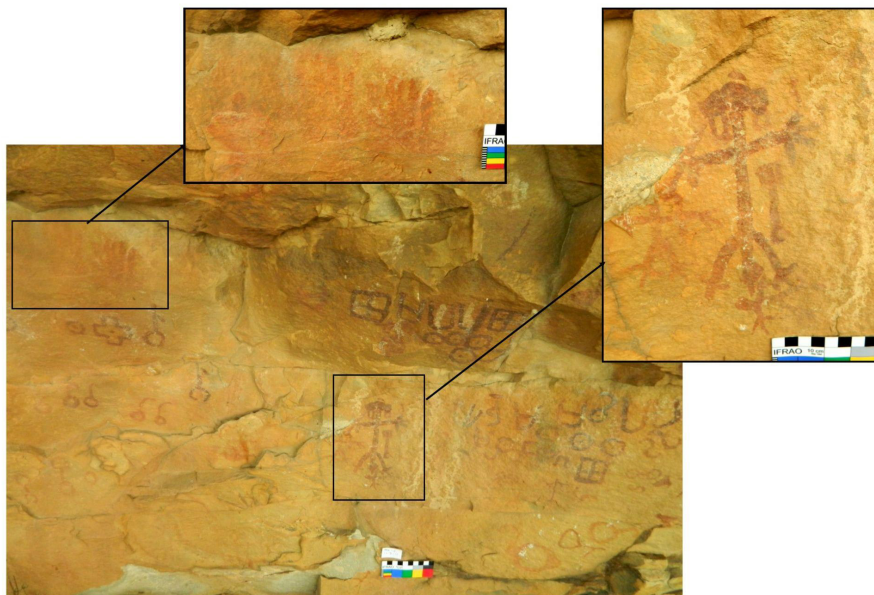


Figure 1 Delivering Mother with Babies, Panchmukhi, Sonbhadra District, Uttar Pradesh (After: Singh, 2023)

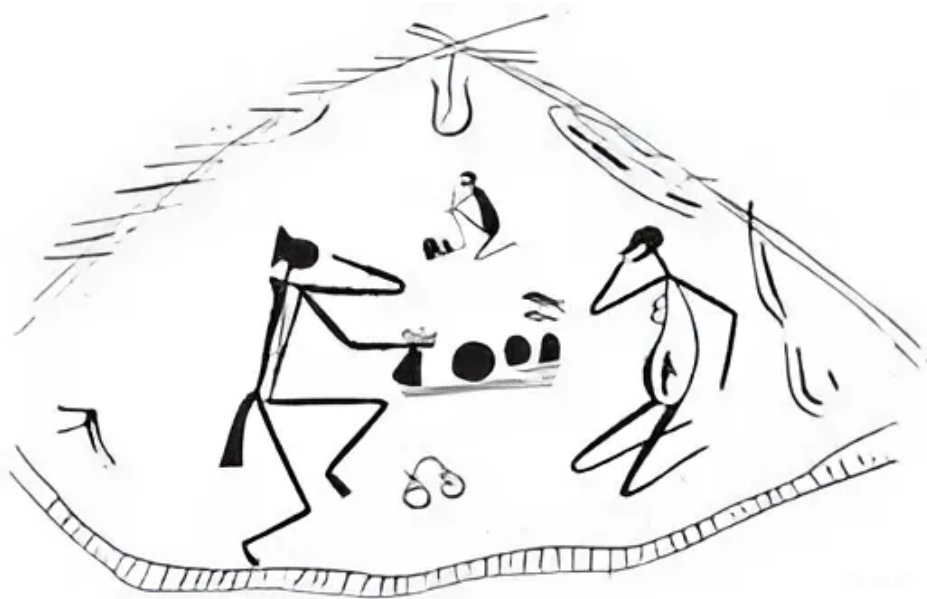


Figure 2 Pregnant Woman with Family, Lakhajoar, Raisen District, Madhya Pradesh (After: Neumayer, 2011)

Table 1 Archaeological Evidence of Pregnancy and Childbirth Scenes in Indian Rock Art (After: Singh, 2023)

Sr No.	Site & Location	Description	Cultural Interpretation by Respected Researcher/s	Chronology (According to Respected Researcher/s)	Reference
1	Chanain Maan Bandha Region, Kaimur District, Bihar	Pregnant women moving in a convoy. Six human figures, including two men and three women, are moving in a convoy with cattle. One person is not clearly visible. Men are depicted with muscular bodies and women with breasts and a pregnant womb. They are following a herd of cattle hump and big horns.	Tiwary (2016) writes about a heterosexual scene and a shepherd family on a journey. A similarity is noticed in Chaturbhujnath Nala rock paintings.	Herds of humped cattle indicated the painting belongs to an agricultural society. It could be a Chalcolithic painting.	(Tiwary, 2016)
2	Adhaura Region, Kaimur District, Bihar	Delivering mother. A human figure with a big belly, widely stretched legs, and one hand on the waist. Another smaller human figure is depicted between its legs.	Tiwary (2019) writes it as an elephant-like human figure.	According to Tiwary (2019), the figure belongs to Phase I paintings of the shelter, which may be Chalcolithic.	(Tiwary, 2019)
3	Panchmukhi Sonbhadra District, Uttar Pradesh	Delivering mother. A human figure (woman) with stretched legs and hands. An object with a circular end is extruding from her womb, which is probably a newborn. Another human depicted below her is spreading her hands to take the baby. Two small anthropomorphs are made by each side of the delivering woman. There are more female figures in the same style made in the shelter. Other motifs are various abstract symbols.	No Detail	Early Historic	Visited by the Researcher
4	Chaturbhujnath Nala Shelter No. 81 Mandsaur District, Madhya Pradesh	Pregnant women in the Caravan. A large convoy of men, women, and cattle is depicted, in which women are shown pregnant and carrying some object on their heads. Men also carry <i>kānvaṛa</i> (Loads hanging from both ends of a stick carried over the shoulders). A few ithyphallic men in the front row are holding the horns of cattle like they are confronting them. The whole scene is superimposed on earlier depictions of humped and big-horn cattle.	The scene is described by Kumar (2016) as an erotic ritual.	Kumar (2007) has kept the painting in <i>Phase IIa</i> in the chronology of Chambal rock art, which means it belongs to a settled pastoral society or Chalcolithic period.	(Kumar, 2007)
5	Urden Raisen District, Madhya Pradesh	Women in the birthing position. On the right, two women are sitting in a squat position exposing their vulvae. Two human figures spread their hands to each other on the left side. Neumayer says they are male boxers, but there is no sign of gender or fighting. One more human figure above seems to be running towards the two human figures.	According to Neumayer (2011), females are shown as subjects in Chalcolithic art.	Chalcolithic	(Neumayer, 2011)

Sr No.	Site & Location	Description	Cultural Interpretation by Respected Researcher/s	Chronology (According to Respected Researcher/s)	Reference
		Women giving birth.			
6	Bhimbetka Raisen District, Madhya Pradesh	There are three figures in squat position, and their bodies are outlined and decorated with v and () shape designs, and they have been called <i>spider shape women</i> by Mathpal (1984). The middle one is the biggest, and an infant is depicted below her genitals, which seems like a delivery scene. Other spider-shaped figures vanished partially. Other motifs are stick human figures.	Mathpal (1984) writes the woman as .	Mesolithic	(Mathpal, 1984)
		Pregnant woman.			
7	Lakhajoar Raisen District, Madhya Pradesh	There is a scene of a family sitting inside a hut. A man, a woman (shown with breasts), and a child (smaller human figure in the middle), all taking meals. The woman is pregnant, sitting on the right side. This is a unique picture mirroring prehistoric social life.	Neumayer didn't notice that the woman was pregnant, but, in my view, other members who are also taking meals are not shown with a big belly or a meal inside the stomach in X-ray style. Only the woman is shown with an object inside her belly to show her pregnancy.	Mesolithic	(Neumayer, 2011)
		Copulating humans, Pregnant woman, Woman giving birth, and playing child scenes.			
8	Bhonrawali Shelter II F-5 Raisen District, Madhya Pradesh	There is a copulating scene on the ceiling of the shelter. On the wall are four human figures, including two men and two women. The front one is pregnant, and the other is not clearly visible. Below it, a woman is depicted giving birth to a child, and towards the right, a man is depicted running after a child who seems to be playing with it.	No Detail	No Detail	(Mathpal, 1998)
		Pregnant woman.			
9	Marhadeo Rock Shelter No. 3 Pachmarhi, Hoshangabad District, Madhya Pradesh	A pregnant woman holding a pot on her head and moving to the left.	No Detail	No Detail	(Gupt, 1960)
		Pregnant women (2) and a horse.			
10	Mahadeo Cave Pachmarhi, Hoshangabad District, Madhya Pradesh	In the scene, a horse is depicted in a running posture. Two pregnant women with a filled pot on their heads seem to be running behind a horse. One woman is holding the tail of a horse with one hand and holding another woman's hand with the other.	No Detail	Historic	(Gupt, 1960)

humans, if they are part of the painting. Animal pregnancy depictions could be a way of teaching people not to hunt them down and echo the importance of fertility. Some of the human childbirth scenes have been associated with the legacy and worship of the Mother Goddess. Along with child birthing scenes, we find abstract motifs such as v shapes, often interpreted as the vulva. In certain rock paintings, the female figure is shown as huge and with exaggerated organs as compared to the other figures around her. This, along with her exposed genitals, has also contributed to the tradition of the Mother Goddess (Singh, 2023). This also goes to show that she was worshipped for fertility and a safe pregnancy.

Though the depictions are rare, these paintings give us an insight into the early communities and how they acknowledged the various key changes in life. They not only performed various rituals for it but also recorded them. The depictions of pregnancy and birthing positions suggest the *samskāra* of life, especially *Garbhādhāna*. Family depictions suggest family bonds, continuity of traditions, among others. These depictions indicate that these were valued even in earlier times, and their continuity can be seen even in the present. The rock art gives us a glance into how ancient people saw the world and how the cycle of life was something sacred to them. The depiction of pregnancy and childbirth was not just a record; it suggests the divinity of the mother, fertility, and continuity.

9. REPRESENTATION OF LIFE AND FERTILITY IN THE WORLD CONTEXT

9.1 Visual Representation of Death and the Afterlife

The plus-in-circle symbol, a simple geometric form composed of a cross enclosed within a circle, has emerged as one of the most persistent and powerful icons across cultures and time periods (Tiwary, 2013). Universally, it has been interpreted as representing the four cardinal directions or the four classical elements (earth, water, air, and fire), thus symbolizing cosmic balance, unity, and the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual realms. In various cultural traditions, this

symbol assumes different meanings. When associated with the image of divinities, it gives the idea of evil eye. The presence of this symbol can be found on various artifacts, suggesting its survival from a prehistoric time, across the globe (Figure 3). Though generally it has been used as a sign of death, sometimes its purpose may be purely decorative or may hold other meanings. For example, in Celtic Christianity, it forms the basis of the Celtic Cross, a symbol of eternity and divine order. In Viking and Germanic traditions, it appears as the death rune, a symbol associated with mortality, often found on the gravestones of soldiers and described as the dead man's rune following World War II. In Japan, similar symbolic structures are reflected in the Mitsu Tomoe, while in Bhutan and Tibet, the concept of the Trimurti aligns with the themes of cyclical time, transformation, and spiritual integration (Womack, 2005; Nagar, 2024).

In the Indian context, this symbol has been reported from various rock art sites across the subcontinent. It has been found at sites in Ladakh, Ernakulam, Kabra Pahar, Madhya Pradesh, Sitakhardi, Kaimur, Central India, and Odisha. This symbol has also been recognised from the stupas of Sarnath, Sanchi, Bharhut, and Mathura, thus acknowledging its association with the religions of Buddhism and Jainism. Stupas in Buddhism were considered symbols of transition into a higher state of liberation or Nirvana, and the depiction of the plus in circle symbol on these can have a similar meaning. The *Harivaṃsa Purāṇa* and other Śaiva texts affirm this association, positioning the symbol as a representation of cosmic impermanence and transformational power. This symbol is also one of the earliest non-figurative graphic signs found in human history, appearing in Bronze Age rock art from diverse regions, including Egypt, China, Pre-Columbian America, Denmark (Sydbornholm), and India (Singh, 2023; Tiwary, 2013; Kulkarni, 2021; Guidolin, 2009).

In the Kaimur region of the Vindhyan Range, over eleven rock shelters display this symbol, often rendered in light and dark *geru* (red ochre). Its placement near trident motifs suggests a symbolic association. These motifs frequently appear alongside scenes of battle, where armed figures engage in combat, possibly commemorating fallen warriors. These visual arrangements may have functioned as ritual memorials, offering the deceased spiritual passage and invoking divine protection for their rebirth. Funerary symbolism in the Vindhyan context extends

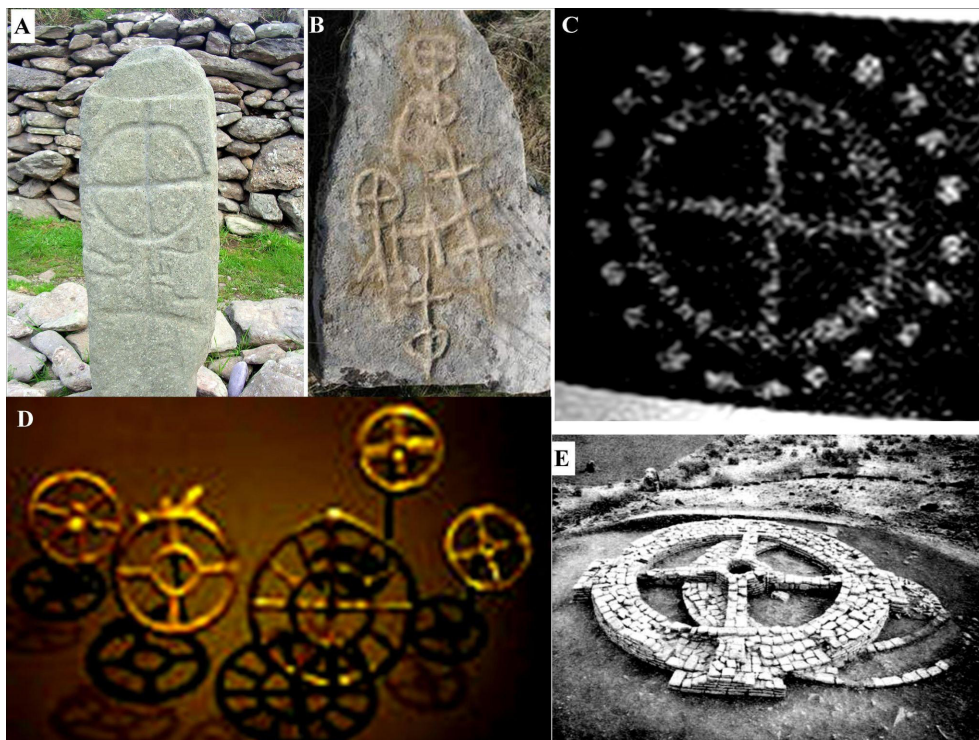


Figure 3 (A) Pillar Stone from Megalithic Burial, Japan; (B) Megalithic Burial Pillar Stone, Gallarus Oratory, County Kerry, Ireland; (C) Petroglyphs at Mexico Megalithic Tomb; (D) Metallic Wheel Pendants in Zurich, Swiss National Museum; (E) Exposed Architectural Plan of Stupa with Swastika inside Circle, Nagarjunakonda (Source-ASI).

Table 2 Plus-in-Circle Symbols in Varied Contexts

Sr No.	Period	Site	Context	Material
1	Prehistoric Cave	Sitakhardi (Chambal Valley) Bhimbetka (Central India) Kaimur (Bihar)	Rock Art	On the Rock Wall
2	Early Historic	Kaushambi (Son Valley) Rajghat Bhabua (Kaimur Range)	Pañca Marked Coins	Silver and Copper
3	Early Historic-Historical	Kaushambi (Son Valley)	Uninscribed Cast Coin	Copper
4	Historical	Sanchi (Vidhyan Range)	On the Stone Architectural Members, Burial	No Detail
		Rajghat Period III Rajghat I-II	Pottery Terracotta	No Detail Terracotta

beyond visual motifs (Tiway, 2013). Evidence suggests the prevalence of ancestor worship and elaborate death rituals, including rites intended to guide the deceased during the transitional period between death and reincarnation. These practices are intertwined with beliefs in karma, caste, and the afterlife and continue in localized forms even today. Among certain caste groups, annual ancestral rites are conducted to honor the spirits of male ancestors, who are believed to aid in agricultural fertility and familial well-being, further blurring the line between the sacred and the material (Jung & Franz, 1964; Jurewicz, 2008).

There is considerable evidence of the plus-in-circle symbol being used across different regions and time periods, each reflecting varied cultural meanings and purposes. Table 2 exhibits a comprehensive listing of the motif across different archaeological occurrence like in prehistoric rock art sites like Sitakhardi, Bhimbetka, and Kaimur, this symbol appears frequently, often in association with ritual scenes or near war-related imagery, death, or cosmic order. Later, during the early historic period, the same symbol is found on punch-marked coins from sites like Kaushambi, Rajghat, and Bhabua, indicating its continued symbolic importance, perhaps as a mark of protection, divinity, or authority. In the Buddhist site of Sanchi, the plus-in-circle is carved into stone architectural elements and is also seen in connection with burial practices, suggesting its use in relation to death, the afterlife, or spiritual transition. These examples show that people across different periods adapted the plus-in-circle symbol according to the materials available to them, whether rock, metal, or stone, and used it to express significant beliefs about life, death, and beyond. It reflects how a single symbol can carry evolving meanings while remaining spiritually or culturally relevant through time.

9.2 Symbolic Parallel: The Ladder Motif

In many religious and cultural traditions across the world, the symbol of the ladder holds deep spiritual and psychological meaning. It is often portrayed as a bridge between the earthly realm and the divine, symbolizing ascent to a higher spiritual state, enlightenment, or access to heaven (Table 3). In Indian literature, this concept appears repeatedly (Kumar, 2016). In the Rāmāyaṇa, Ravana is said to have planned the construction of a staircase to heaven, an act symbolizing his ambition to reach the divine realm through his power. In the Māhābhārata, Arjuna successfully builds a staircase to heaven and allows Bhima to ascend, reflecting not only divine favor but also the hero's spiritual progression. Similarly, in Raghuvamsha, the great Sanskrit epic by Kālidāsa, there are narratives where King Dilip and even Lord Rāma are described as ascending to heaven, emphasizing the belief in a sacred path to the divine.

In Buddhist literature, the idea is also significant. According to the Dhammapada Aṭṭakathā, after attaining enlightenment, Lord Buddha ascended to the Trayāstrimśa heaven to meet his mother and preach the Abhidhamma. He stayed there for three months and later returned to earth, symbolizing a cycle of ascent for spiritual duty and return for worldly guidance. This theme is not confined to Indian traditions. In the Hebrew Bible, the story of Jacob's Ladder (Book of Genesis, Chapter 28) describes a vision in which the patriarch Jacob sees a ladder reaching up to heaven, with angels ascending and descending on it. This dream, seen during his journey, represents divine connection, guidance, and protection. Similarly, in Islamic tradition, there are beliefs related to ascension to heaven (Mi'raj), where the Prophet Muhammad is believed



Figure 4 Engraving over the Burial Potteries, Tamil Nadu (Courtesy: K. Rajan)

Table 3 World Mythology on Ladder

Sr No.	Literature / Myth	Origin	Story	Purpose
1	Rāmayaṇa	India	Ravana wanted to build a staircase that would directly lead to heaven. The Pauri wala of Sirmaur district, Himachal Pradesh is associated with this story. Pauri wala is well known as the place of the incident. Swarg ki Seerhi (steps to heaven).	This would let people pray to him. To get Amaratva (immortality).
2	Māhābhārata	India	Arjuna successfully builds a staircase to heaven and sends Bhīma.	To get some divine flowers for their mother's prayer.
3	Raghuvamsha	India	King Dilip and Lord Rāma ascended to heaven.	To reach heaven and path for the devotees.
4	Dhammapada-Āṭṭakathā	India	Lord Buddha went to Trāyastriṃśa heaven to meet his mother after enlightenment. He stayed there for 3 months and decided to return to the land. He came down to the place at modern Sankissa in Farrukhabad district of Uttar Pradesh.	To teach the Abhidharma to his mother and celestial beings.
5	Hebrew Bible Jacob's Ladder	Europe	Jacob's Ladder is a ladder leading to heaven that was featured in a dream the biblical Patriarch Jacob had during his flight from his brother Esau in the Book of Genesis (chapter 28). It is similar to Islamic belief.	The ladder signifies the divine connection between God and the earthly realm, specifically Jacob's family.
6	The Ladder of Divine Ascent, or Ladder of Paradise, by John Climacus in c. 600 CE	On the shore of the Red Sea, Eastern Christianity	Divided into thirty parts, or <i>steps</i> , in memory of the thirty years of the life of Christ, the Divine model of the religious, it presents a picture of all the virtues. It contains many parables and historical touches, drawn principally from monastic life, and exhibits the practical application of precepts.	The ladder that extends from the bottom of hell to the peak of paradise.
7	Great Chain of Being by ancient Greek Neoplatonists c. 300 CE	Europe	The chain begins with God and descends through angels, humans, animals, and plants to minerals.	A hierarchical structure of all matter and life, as thought by medieval Christianity to have been decreed by God.

to have ascended through the heavens in a mystical journey, which includes ladder-like stages or realms.

These recurring motifs across Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and Islamic traditions show that the ladder is more than a physical object. It is a powerful symbol of spiritual elevation, divine connection, and human aspiration. Through archaeological evidences like the burial potsherds from Tamil Nadu exhibit the ladder motif (Figure 4), exhibiting symbolic representation of the spiritual belief. On a psychological level, the image of a ladder appeals deeply to the human mind, as it mirrors our internal desire to rise above the ordinary, to seek enlightenment, and to connect with a greater reality beyond the material world. Thus, the ladder becomes both a religious symbol and a universal metaphor for transcendence, growth, and the journey of the soul.

10. CONCLUSION

The present study examines selected motifs from the prehistoric rock art of the Vindhyan region with particular attention to imagery associated with fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, and geometric forms such as the *plus-in-circle* motif. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining archaeological observation, art historical comparison, and symbolic interpretation, the analysis explored how certain visual elements may reflect broader cultural concerns related to life processes and cyclical regeneration.

Rather than proposing a direct or linear continuity between prehistoric imagery and later philosophical doctrines, the study has approached these motifs cautiously as possible symbolic expressions embedded within the cultural and ritual contexts of early communities. The recurrence of specific motifs associated with human figures and reproductive themes suggests that themes of fertility, continuity of life, and renewal may have held symbolic importance in the visual language of these prehistoric societies.

The research contributes to ongoing discussions on the interpretation of prehistoric symbolic systems by demonstrating how rock art imagery can be examined through multiple disciplinary perspectives. At the same time, it recognizes that interpretations of prehistoric symbolism remain inherently tentative due to the absence of textual explanations and the long temporal distance separating the creators of the art from later philosophical traditions.

Future research may further refine such interpretations through more systematic regional documentation, contextual archaeological investigations, digital documentation techniques, and comparative ethnographic studies. Such approaches may help to better understand the cultural meanings embedded in rock art and their relationship to the broader cognitive and ritual landscapes of prehistoric communities in the Vindhyan region.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank the research grants provided by the Department of Science and Technology, Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India, the Indian Knowledge System, Ministry of Education, and the Institute of Eminence Incentive Grant from Banaras Hindu University. We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to Ankita for her valuable expertise, which played a crucial role in the completion of this paper.

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