

Murugeshi Udipi

Dear Friends, Dear Students, Dear Comrades of the rock art fraternity, Dear all who have gathered today at this beautiful spot at Avalakki Parai in full view of the prominent Hill watching over the ancient Mokkambika sanctuary.

It was about 150 years ago, that Raja Ravi Varma, the great painter of Indian Deities came through this part, to dedicate his talent and life to the goddess of art and learning at the Mokkambikka Temple. It was also in this beautiful landscape that he visualized one of the most iconic paintings of his, the painting of Goddess Saraswati, sitting in a primeval landscape enthroned on a rock, playing the veena, with her vahana, the peacock, at her feet.

Today we celebrate here other much earlier pictures. Pictures which are so ancient, that much of their tradition has been buried. The original meaning of these pictures might be lost to us, still we antiquarians and archaeologists have come to see and try to understand the ancient pictures, which are engraved hardly 100m from where we are sitting here, into the laterite-surface. Such engravings are found in several places of the South Kanara Region as well as from many different places along the western coast of India, from Kerala in the south to the Sindhudurg and Ratnagiri Districts of Maharashtra in the north.

Of course local people always have known and cherished such ancient remains as an ancestral heritage. Some of it was worshiped; others were just ignored, but still valued till today. Most of these engravings which are found now were simply forgotten, overgrown by grasses and bushes or even thin layers of sand and soil has covered it, only to be uncovered by flooding rivers or by earth moving activities. We, the visitors and antiquarians have come today from so many places far and wide in India and beyond to celebrate the “rediscovery” of such remains here, and before all we are thankful to the local people, who have maintained these engraving, by cherishing their presence. These pictures are windows far into the origins of Indian Art altogether. They come from a hoary past, indeed from such a long time past, that we still do not know yet how to really evaluate it. But I am also convinced, that as these engravings will be seen by so many archaeologists and historians now, they will be broadcasted all over the world, and we will finally come to a better understanding as to their origins and meanings as well as their chronology.

Let me thank for the opportunity you awarded to me and my wife Christine to see these beautiful places. We also have to thank professor Murugeshi from the Mujik Sunder Ram Shetty College of Shirva for their hospitality which they bestowed on us during our stay here. And this is not the first time that Professor Murugeshi hosted us. Already in the year 2010 he led us to the important site at Buddhana Jeddu, where an extensive laterite surface with many engravings was found. Then, as well as now we see the dedicated work of the many students of the Mujik Sunder Ram Shetty College who cleaned the sites from dust and sand for us to make the engravings better visible.

It is a great honour for me to be named the president of this Avalakki Pare meeting, in which so many very distinguished historians and archaeologists are assembled, together with the local residents as well as the many visitors who came from Udipi and places much further away.

Let me say a few words of general observation on the ancient laterite engravings as they are now found so numerous along the Konkan Region.

All these newly discovered laterite pictures face the same problems of archaeological and chronological evaluation, as well as the more mundane problem of their preservation in these times, when India is undergoing an acute era of economic and social transformation.

Every student of Indian rock art --who is in the trade since long-- remembers, that for a long time the extensive region of the Western Ghats as well as the hilly coast line, were considered devoid of any form of prehistoric art. Why it should be like that was always puzzling and hard to understand, since so much rock art was known at the eastern fringes of the Western Ghats, particularly from the granite highlands of the Southern Deccan. Stone tools from the late Stone Age were found from the coastal regions as well, but prehistoric rock art remained elusive from the Konkan region.

It was only in the 1980ies that engravings in laterite surfaces were noticed in Goa, after the river Kushawati was in spate, and cleared several stretches along its banks from overgrown soil and rubble, and uncovered the lateritic bedrock. Where earlier grass and lower vegetation grew, suddenly clean laterite appeared. On these surfaces engraved figures of animals, men and abstract figures appeared. Already then it was understood by the more discerning rock art researchers, that with these engraved pictures on the floor the long spell of the missing prehistoric art in the Konkan region was broken. Similar finds were expected to be reported soon, and so it was.

Still, as it is, archaeologists and rock art researchers in India considered it impossible that engravings in one as brittle and soft surface as laterite is, could be of considerable age. Reports of such engravings therefore were not always considered important enough to be bothered even to look at. Indeed, archaeologists were rather slow in realizing the potential these finds held for the study of prehistory of the coastal region of western India.

After 2010 there was a sudden new momentum in the rock art research of India. It was about that time that the engravings in Buddhani Jeddu in the South-Kanara-Region were brought to the notice of the scientific community by Professor Murugeshi. Some other engravings were also found further south near Kannur in Kerala, and finally many more such laterite engravings were reported from places in the Sindhudurg- and Ratnagiri Districts of Maharashtra.

Although all these engravings were found in very much the same setting over laterite surfaces, the spectrum of the pictures there is far from being uniform, neither in their thematic- nor stylistic content. While the pictures in the south as in Kannur (Kerala), Buddhani Jeddu (Udupi) and in Usgalimal (South Goa), show prominent depictions of humped cattle besides other figures of animals and men, the engravings found to the north from there in the Sindhudurg- and Ratnagiri Districts of Maharashtra contain many wild animals like pigs, rhinos, elephants, bears and many different of sea-creatures, like sharks, sting-rays, octopuses and tortoises, as well as human figures. The whole spectrum of figures there seems to be the output of a long tradition. Why these pictures there do not include humped cattle, the sure indicator of Neolithic/Chalcolithic/Early Historic rock art, is till now not yet to explain. The depiction of humped cattle, that is cattle of the brahmani cow type spurting a prominent hump over its shoulders, is an almost iconic sign of Neolithic/ Chalcolithic origins in all the rock art of India, be it in the bruising or paintings of the Southern Deccan or in the many rock art sites in the quartzitic regions of Central India. Here in the engravings of Avalakki Pare as well we see human figures with outstretched arms and besides and around them figures of cattle, all with a prominent hump on their shoulders, which indicates the chronological position of these engravings. But it should be remembered, that all the chronological speculations about the

laterite-engravings in the Konkan are still very speculative, which means, the chronology of this pictures are still under discussion.

Already in the engravings of Buddhana Jeddu, there are besides the humped cattle, other depictions of bovinds, which were stylistically close to Mesolithic paintings from the southern Deccan.

Although these stylistic and thematic Mesolithic features are missing here in Avalakki Pare. But as with pictures at other find-spots, more pictures will be noticed very soon, and the engravings here will have to be chronologically evaluated once more. In the surroundings of this Avalakki Parai indications of prehistoric stone tools were found, partly in form of broken ring-stones, partly in the form of broken blades of microlithic origins. As the archaeological observation is sharpened also by this rock art festival, we surely will soon hear more about Stone Age tools from this part of the land.

All the laterite engravings along the Konkan coast, were found at homogenous laterite surfaces with little or no soil-cover. These spaces, which in the Maharati speaking regions are termed "Sada", are elevated grass lands, overgrown by dense rushes of grass after the rain, which make good pasture lands, but are otherwise quite useless as agricultural lands. These "Sadas" were till recently considered as "Wastelands", traditional grazing-grounds for village flocks and the herds of traditional nomadic tribesmen with their herds of goats and sheep during their seasonal migrations. Many of these Grasslands are "harvested" in the dry season by villagers. The harvested grass is stored here in haystacks as fodder for the domestic livestock, or sold into nearby towns as fodder for dairy-cattle or to horse owners.

By now these formerly thinly administrated "waste-lands" have become much thought after cheap plots for housing sites, farmlands or infrastructure developments like roads, electricity lines, petrol bunks, industrial estates, and all other buildings which come along with "development".

Especially newly prepared farmlands take up much of such spaces at an ever growing rate. The homogenous laterite-surfaces which formerly were to tough to be used for traditional agriculture, can now be broken up by mechanized power-equipment or by blasting, while bore wells can be dug by hydraulic equipments. Many large stretches of land get converted into mango gardens, with little consideration of the antiquarian remains which might be destroyed in the process of preparing the surface of the bedrock for the plantation of trees.

On the other hand with a growing civil society there comes also new awareness of what has to be considered as "Heritage". I remember the villagers of Kacheli in the Ratnagiri District, who protected the large carving of an elephant with an elevated walkway and viewing platform to allow visitors to view the large engraving from above and from all sides without stepping on the picture itself. The villagers bore the considerable cost of this walkway by their own collection, firstly out of pride of possessing such prehistoric engraving of an elephant, and secondly also by the realization that in the future their formerly backward location will change with all the newly built roads and other facilities, which in time will also bring tourist to see the antiquarian remains. This tourist traffic in future will also bring in some revenue.

Of course, not all the sites are so well perceived socially. A grave danger for these sites is also the building industry which is not only land-hungry, but also material hungry. All along the Konkan region laterite has become a much thought after building material. Formerly broken laterite stones were used in constructing boundary walls around agricultural farms. This age old tradition is now replaced by a mechanized laterite mining industry, where homogenous laterite layers are mined with power driven saw-blades into norm-sized blocks, which are then used very

much like bricks are used in other parts of the country. The monetary interests override here often the interest of the civil-society to maintain an ancient heritage. I see here the importance of the universities and colleges and other learned societies to make people aware of these forgotten engravings as an important remains of the past. This rock art festival therefore as well is a potent means to create awareness for a subtle piece of prehistoric heritage, which too easily is overlooked and overridden by short monetary gains. Awareness is a long term strategy to maintain a heritage which was here already many hundreds- or even thousands of years. Such things can not be recreated once they are gone. But it is also not so difficult to spare spaces where such prehistoric artefacts are found.

I therefore congratulate the Mujik Sunder Ram Shetty College of Shirva, which supported the archaeological projects of Professor Murugeshi and many of his colleagues, who since more than 15 years explore and bring prehistoric artefacts and laterite-engravings to the notice of a growing and eager to listen civil society. It will be this society within the larger Indian society, which ultimately will also protect and care for these subtle remains of prehistoric origins. The people will be proud of to have in their neighbourhood this peculiar class of engravings from their ancestors of several millennia in the same way as they are now aware of the value of their ancient buildings, temples, hero-stones or megalithic stone settings.

India is one of these world regions where ancient rock art in caves and rock shelters have survived over millennia. This was acknowledged internationally when on the rock art site of Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh was conferred the title of “World Heritage of Mankind” by the UNESCO, the cultural branch of the United Nations in 2002. It would be more than desirable if the unique laterite cuts and laterite engravings of the Konkan region as well would be elevated and protected under a similar understanding of its “Heritage-status”. It will give this remains of early Art in India a status which then would not be overlooked any more.

I realize that many more such engravings will be found here and at other places along the hills and coastlines of the Konkan, wherever such lateritic surfaces are found. Some of these finds will need immediate attention and protection. Others are still quite safely tucked away at far off hidden places. All of it will need protection as well as the attention of antiquarian curiosity. It was this curiosity which brought me and my wife Christine to your beautiful place here. We thank you all very much for this opportunity.

Once more we wish professor Murugeshi and all his students and colleagues and all the people of Avalakki Pare all the best in their endeavour to study, publicise and protect the laterite engravings which have been brought to light by their devoted work.

With all our sincere thanks,

Erwin Neumayer  
Vienna, Austria