

Original Research Article

Symbolism and Survival: Insights from South Indian Prehistoric Rock Art and Cave Shelters

Dr. K. Jennifer

*Assistant Professor, PG & Research Centre of History, Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women (Autonomous)
Periyakulam Dist. Theni 625601 Tamil Nadu, India*

Corresponding author E-mail: jenniferk2050@gmail.com

Received: 07 December, 2025 | Accepted: 02 January, 2026 | Published: 08 January, 2026

Abstract

Prehistoric rock art and cave shelters in South India provide invaluable insights into the lives, beliefs, and survival strategies of early human communities. These ancient creations serve as a dual testament to the symbolic expressions and practical adaptations of prehistoric societies. This study explores how symbolism in rock art reflects the spiritual, social, and cultural frameworks of the time, while also examining the role of cave shelters in ensuring physical survival. The recurring motifs, such as depictions of animals, human figures, and abstract patterns, are analyzed for their potential meanings and connections to ritualistic practices, ecological awareness, and communication systems. The geographical distribution of these shelters, often strategically located near vital resources, underscores their role in survival amidst a challenging environment. By integrating perspectives from archaeology, anthropology, and art history, this research aims to decode the symbolic and functional significance of these prehistoric artifacts. Additionally, the study addresses the techniques and materials employed in creating the rock art and the challenges of preserving these fragile cultural heritages against modern threats. Ultimately, this research highlights the intricate interplay between survival and symbolism, offering a deeper understanding of how early humans in South India perceived and interacted with their world.

Keywords: Prehistoric, cave shelters, geographical, archaeology, anthropology

Introduction

South India's prehistoric rock art and cave shelters are windows into an ancient world where survival and symbolism intertwined. These art forms, etched or painted on rock faces, stand as timeless remnants of human ingenuity, creativity, and resilience. Created by early hunter-gatherer communities, these artistic expressions were not merely aesthetic but also held profound symbolic meanings, reflecting their relationship with nature, spiritual beliefs, and social structures. The cave shelters, nestled in rugged terrains, offered protection against harsh climatic conditions and wild animals while serving as living quarters for prehistoric communities. The rock art within these shelters provides insights into their daily lives, rituals, and survival strategies, depicting scenes of hunting, dancing, animals, and abstract motifs. This article delves into the interplay between symbolism and survival as revealed through South Indian prehistoric rock art and cave shelters, exploring their cultural, spiritual, and anthropological significance. By analyzing these ancient masterpieces, we uncover the stories of early human societies, their interaction with the environment, and their efforts to leave enduring marks of their existence.

Exploring Ancient Cultural Narratives

South India is home to some of the world's most fascinating prehistoric rock art and cave shelters. These ancient artworks and natural shelters, spread across regions like Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh, reveal much more than just early human survival. They offer profound insights into the symbolic world of prehistoric societies and their efforts to adapt to and communicate with the natural world. This article delves into the intersection of symbolism and survival through the lens of rock art and cave shelters, offering a deeper understanding of the past and its enduring impact on human evolution.

The Role of Cave Shelters in Survival

Protection and Habitat

Early humans used caves as shelters to protect themselves from harsh weather conditions, predators, and other environmental threats. These caves, often located near water sources and hunting grounds, became central to their survival strategies.

Living Spaces

Caves served as homes, offering a secure base for everyday life and collective activities such as cooking, sleeping, and social interaction. The strategic placement of these shelters ensured that human communities could access necessary resources.

Rock Art as a Symbolic Expression of Life

Narratives and Rituals

The rock art found in these caves depicts hunting scenes, dancing, animals, and abstract symbols that reflect early human beliefs, social structures, and rituals. Many of these motifs likely held spiritual significance, representing the connection between humans, nature, and the divine.

Symbols of Spiritual and Social Life

Paintings and engravings were more than artistic expressions; they were vital forms of communication, used to pass down stories, rituals, and collective knowledge. Abstract and geometric patterns often had spiritual or ritualistic meanings, possibly tied to fertility, hunting, or protection.

South Indian Prehistoric Sites

Karnataka: Badami and Sanganakallu

Badami

Situated in northern Karnataka, Badami is renowned for its rock-cut temples and caves that date back to the 6th century. Badami is famous for its four rock-cut temples carved into sandstone hills. The caves, while mostly religious in purpose, also exhibit depictions of human life and nature. These caves represent the cultural and architectural advances of the Chalukya dynasty, with intricate sculptures and carvings. Some caves have vivid rock art that showcases early forms of human expression. The images carved into the rocks show humans, animals, and natural scenes, highlighting the interaction between early humans and their environment. The artwork and carvings offer an insight into the prehistoric way of life in the region, as well as early religious beliefs, such as Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism.

Sanganakallu

Situated near the town of Bellary, in the southern part of Karnataka, Sanganakallu is an important prehistoric site. The site is known for its extensive rock art, which includes carvings of animals, human figures, and abstract symbols. It also features stone tools, which provide evidence of early human habitation in the area. Sanganakallu is part of the larger “Sanganakallu-Sannati” prehistoric complex, which provides valuable insight into the daily lives of prehistoric people, their social structures, and their interactions with nature. It is believed to have been inhabited during the Neolithic period.

Tamil Nadu: Pongalur and Kanchipuram

Pongalur

Pongalur, located in the Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu, is known for its rock shelters and prehistoric evidence. The site features several rock shelters with carvings and etchings, providing valuable clues about the early human inhabitants of the region. These rock shelters are believed to have been used by humans during the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods.

Evidence of Early Social Structures: Carvings found at Pongalur include depictions of animals and human figures, which shed light on the early social structure and religious practices. The images suggest that early humans in the region might have had a rudimentary form of social organization. Some of the symbols and carvings found at the site indicate early religious beliefs, possibly associated with animism or ancestor worship.

Kanchipuram

Kanchipuram, one of the ancient cities of Tamil Nadu, has been a center of culture and religion for thousands of years. The rock shelters in Kanchipuram have carvings that date back to prehistoric times. These shelters have been linked to early human habitation and may have served as living spaces or places of ritual significance. The carvings and symbols in the rock shelters suggest that early human societies in this region had a complex social structure,

possibly centered around religious or tribal practices. Evidence of trade and cultural exchanges can also be inferred from the artifacts found in these shelters. Kanchipuram is known for its ancient temples, and some of the prehistoric sites here may have later evolved into religious and cultural centers. The evidence of early religious practices, as shown in the carvings, offers insight into the spiritual life of early humans.

Kerala: Edakkal Caves

The Edakkal Caves are located in the Wayanad district of Kerala, situated in the Western Ghats. The caves are famous for their intricate petroglyphs that date back to at least 6,000 years ago. These petroglyphs include depictions of human figures, animals, and abstract symbols. The carvings provide evidence of the cultural and artistic practices of prehistoric humans.

The petroglyphs at Edakkal depict scenes of everyday life, hunting, and interactions with animals. The most famous carvings include images of human figures engaged in what seems to be a ceremonial or ritualistic activity. The abstract symbols may represent early forms of writing or communication. The Edakkal Caves are believed to have been used as shelters by early humans, who may have also used the space for ritualistic purposes. The art found here provides clues to the beliefs and social systems of the people who inhabited the region. Edakkal is one of the oldest rock art sites in India, and the petroglyphs continue to be a subject of study for archaeologists and historians seeking to understand the early cultural practices of South Indian communities.

Andhra Pradesh: Kurnool Caves

Kurnool Caves

The Kurnool Caves are located in the Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh, famous for its rich prehistoric history. The caves feature rock art that depicts scenes of daily life, tools, and animals. Some carvings show early humans engaged in hunting, while others depict tools used for various tasks. The use of fire is also evidenced by the presence of charcoal and burnt remains in the cave deposits. These caves are significant because they provide evidence of early human habitation, showing how prehistoric humans adapted to the environment, used tools, and developed social structures. The caves also contain evidence of the earliest forms of human domestication and agricultural practices. The Kurnool Caves provide valuable evidence of the use of fire by early humans in the region, showcasing their ability to control fire for warmth, cooking, and protection. The site also suggests that these early humans may have lived in these caves for extended periods.

The Interplay Between Symbolism and Survival

Practical Survival through Art

The rock art is not only a reflection of daily activities like hunting and gathering but also offers clues about survival strategies, including tools, techniques, and community cooperation. By understanding the environment and animals through art, early humans were able to develop effective survival tactics, such as hunting and food gathering.

Spiritual Survival

Rituals, often depicted in rock art, may have been central to ensuring prosperity, fertility, and protection for the community. Cave shelters likely served as spaces for spiritual practices and ceremonies, demonstrating the importance of belief systems in their survival.

Cultural and Anthropological Significance

Prehistoric rock art and archaeological sites not only offer tangible evidence of early human life but also reveal the complex spiritual, social, and cultural structures that existed long before written history. Among these, the spiritual connection to nature and the social organization and cohesion of early human societies stand out as key aspects of cultural and anthropological significance. Through the analysis of rock art, cave shelters, and artifacts, scholars have gained valuable insights into how early humans perceived their environment and organized their societies.

Symbiotic Relationship Between Humans and Nature

Early human rock art provides powerful evidence of how ancient peoples viewed their connection to the natural world. The depictions of animals, plants, and celestial bodies suggest a deep spiritual relationship with the environment. Animals, in particular, were often portrayed in a manner that indicates reverence, with some interpretations suggesting that they were not merely subjects of hunting but also had symbolic or spiritual significance.

Animal Symbolism

Many prehistoric rock carvings feature large animals such as buffalo, lions, elephants, and wild horses. These animals were often associated with rituals, and some scholars believe they were linked to hunting magic or rites intended to ensure success in the hunt. Others argue that these animals symbolized power, fertility, and the life force, representing the spiritual essence of nature that humans sought to align with.

Shamanistic Practices

In many prehistoric cultures, it is believed that early humans practiced forms of shamanism or animism, where the spiritual world was closely connected to the natural world. Rock art could have been used to invoke the spirits of animals or nature to ensure good fortune or to facilitate communication with the divine. These spiritual practices were likely tied to survival and were integral to the day-to-day life of early humans.

Nature as Sacred

The frequent presence of natural motifs such as the sun, stars, and moon in rock art, along with the specific locations of the art within caves and shelters, hints at the sacredness attributed to the environment. Caves themselves, as natural formations, might have been seen as places of spiritual significance or as portals between the human and spiritual realms.

Impact on Cultural Identity

Cultural Narratives: The spiritual connection to nature not only influenced religious beliefs but also helped form early cultural narratives. These narratives could have been passed down through generations via oral traditions, songs, and stories, intertwined with depictions in rock art. This cultural transmission would have reinforced community cohesion and shared spiritual beliefs. The spiritual significance of nature extended beyond ritual. It permeated daily life through the types of animals hunted, the plant-based foods gathered, and the environmental choices made for shelter. Human survival was deeply embedded in an understanding of the natural world as both a provider and a protector.

Challenges in Preservation

Preserving prehistoric sites, such as rock art, caves, and ancient shelters, is a significant challenge faced by archaeologists, conservationists, and governments worldwide. These sites, which provide valuable insights into early human societies, face various threats to their integrity and longevity. **Erosion and natural deterioration** are key natural challenges, while **human impact**—including tourism, urbanization, and illegal activities—also poses serious risks. This article outlines the challenges involved in preserving these ancient sites and discusses the factors contributing to their deterioration.

Human Impact

Increased Foot Traffic: Many prehistoric sites, such as **Badami**, **Edakkal**, and **Kurnool**, attract a significant number of visitors, including tourists, researchers, and even local populations. While tourism can help raise awareness and fund conservation efforts, it also presents a serious threat. The foot traffic, especially when not controlled, can physically damage the surfaces of caves, leading to the gradual erosion of delicate rock art. Even minor contact can cause abrasion and loss of detail in the carvings.

Vandalism and Graffiti: Human interaction with prehistoric rock art is often a source of deliberate damage. Vandalism, such as carving modern symbols, names, or other graffiti onto ancient rocks, is a serious problem. This is particularly common in sites that are easily accessible. In some cases, tourists may unknowingly damage the sites, either through direct contact with the artwork or through the introduction of pollutants, such as oils from skin, which can degrade the rock surface.

Limited Awareness

Many of these sites remain under-protected due to a lack of public awareness and insufficient documentation.

Conservation and Protection Efforts

Government and NGO Initiatives

Efforts to protect and document these sites have been underway, with archaeological surveys, local involvement, and heritage tourism being key elements of conservation strategies.

Sustainable Heritage Tourism

Promoting eco-friendly tourism and raising awareness among local communities can ensure the long-term survival of these cultural treasures.

Conclusion

The prehistoric rock art and cave shelters of South India offer a fascinating glimpse into the past, where survival and symbolism intersected to shape the lives of early humans. These ancient remnants are not only invaluable sources of historical and cultural information but also a testament to human resilience, creativity, and the enduring connection to nature. Preserving these sites is essential for understanding our ancestors and their journey through time, and it is our responsibility to ensure that future generations can continue to learn from these incredible cultural treasures.

References

1. Erwin Neumayer, "Prehistoric Rock Art of India", 1993
2. K.K. Ramachandran, "Rock Art in Kerala: A New Interpretation", 2002
3. V. S. Wakankar, "The Rock Art of Southern India", 1983
4. Yashodhar Mathpal, "Rock Art and the Prehistory of Indian Central Plateau", 1984
5. B.L. Malla "Rock Art Studies: Concept, Methodology, Context" edited, 1999
6. K. Rajan, "Prehistoric Art of Tamil Nadu", 1991
7. D. Sundara Rao, "Rock Art and Tribal Art: A Comparative Study", 2000