



The Bull in Central Indian Rock Art: A study of their Symbolism and Significance

PAWAN HARDE¹

¹ Ph.D Research Scholar, Ancient Indian History Culture and Archaeology, Rashtrasant Tukadoji Maharaj Nagpur University.

Abstract: Central India, known for its rich heritage of rock art, features numerous representations of bulls, particularly in regions like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra. These rock engravings and paintings, dating back to prehistoric and historic times, depict bulls in dynamic poses, emphasizing their significance in daily life, religious beliefs, and the human-animal relationship. The study further considers the role of rock art in preserving and communicating cultural narratives, shedding light on the complex and multifaceted roles that bulls played in the life of ancient Indian societies. Some depictions capture bulls in motion, possibly in hunting or ceremonial scenes, while others appear more static, often used in a symbolic context, potentially reflecting the bull's role as a domesticated animal crucial for agriculture and transport. In many cases, the Art representation of the bull is paired with human figures, reinforcing the bond between mankind and animal, highlighting the bull's central role in the survival and prosperity of early societies. These Art continue to offer a powerful window into the beliefs and values of early societies in India, providing insights into their reverence for animals and their place in the cosmic order. The paper is about to describe the depiction of the bulls in central Indian rock art through the artistic symbolism and its significance.

Keywords: Indian rock art, prehistoric art, Symbolism, Rituals, Archaeological findings, Cultural heritage

Received : 14 January 2026

Revised : 16 February 2026

Accepted : 04 March 2026

Published : 30 June 2026

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Pawan Harde (2026). The Bull in Central Indian Rock Art: A Study of their Symbolism and Significance. *Journal of Studies in South Asia*, 2: 1, pp. 41-51.

Introduction

The rock art of Central India serves as an invaluable repository of the region's cultural and historical evolution, offering insights into the lives of prehistoric and early historic societies. These intricate depictions, found on rock surfaces in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Maharashtra, provide a visual chronicle of human-animal interactions, socio-economic structures, and spiritual beliefs. Among the various subjects portrayed, bulls occupy a significant place, underscoring their vital role in early human settlements. Their repeated representation across multiple sites suggests their integral association with agriculture, trade, and religious traditions.

Bulls have been an essential part of human civilization since prehistoric times, and their depiction in rock art across the globe highlights their universal importance. Evidence from archaeological excavations confirms that early humans domesticated bulls for agricultural purposes, as remains of ploughing and farming activities have been unearthed from Neolithic sites to the Indus Valley Civilization (Marshall, 1931; Possehl, 2002). The domestication of cattle was a turning point in early agricultural societies, allowing for a shift from a nomadic to a settled way of life. Rock art depicting bulls in dynamic postures, often in herding or harnessed to ploughs, suggests their active role in the agrarian economy of prehistoric India (Neumayer, 2010).

Beyond agriculture, bulls held immense significance in trade and transportation. In ancient India, they were a crucial component of *Sarthavaha* (caravan traders) who traversed long distances, facilitating the exchange of goods and cultural ideas. The strength and endurance of bulls made them indispensable for carrying heavy loads, a role that is reflected in various artistic representations from the prehistoric period (Wakankar & Brooks, 1976). Additionally, terracotta figurines of bulls, recovered from multiple archaeological sites, further reinforce their socio-economic prominence. These figurines, often found in religious or domestic contexts, indicate the high status of bulls in early societies, where they were not only economic assets but also symbols of prosperity and stability (Agrawal, 1982).

The spiritual significance of bulls in Indian culture is deeply rooted, particularly in their association with Lord Shiva. In Hindu tradition, Nandi, the sacred bull, serves as the vahana (vehicle) of Shiva and is revered as a guardian of temples. While direct representations of Shiva alongside bulls are absent in Indian rock art, the sheer abundance of bull depictions suggests a strong cultural reverence for the animal (Sharma & Tiwari, 2001). This widespread portrayal implies that the bull held auspicious connotations even in prehistoric belief systems, predating its later religious associations. Scholars have debated whether these early depictions symbolize proto-religious or totemic practices, reflecting the reverence and utility of the bull in daily life.

The frequent depiction of bulls in Indian rock art underscores their multifaceted role in ancient human societies. Their representation in various artistic styles, from realistic engravings to stylized motifs, suggests a long-standing tradition of honoring and documenting their importance. Whether as symbols of power, agricultural assets, or objects of spiritual reverence, bulls remain one of the most commonly depicted animals in India's rock art tradition. Their presence across different historical phases, from the Mesolithic to the Chalcolithic and early historic periods, highlights their enduring significance in shaping human civilization.

Bhimbetka

Bhimbetka, recognized as one of India's most significant rock art sites, holds a prestigious place on the UNESCO World Heritage list. This site, located in Madhya Pradesh, is renowned for its extensive collection of prehistoric rock paintings, which provide crucial insights into the lives and beliefs of early human societies. The rock shelters of Bhimbetka were discovered by the eminent archaeologist Dr. V.S. Wakankar in 1957, and since then, numerous excavations and research studies have been conducted to understand its artistic and cultural significance (Wakankar & Brooks, 1976). The site comprises over 700 rock shelters, of which nearly 400 contain prehistoric paintings, spanning from the Mesolithic to the early historic period (Neumayer, 2010).

Among the various subjects depicted in the rock art of Bhimbetka, bulls occupy a prominent position, reflecting their vital role in early societies. The depictions of bulls in Bhimbetka can be broadly categorized into two distinct types: humped bulls (*Bos indicus*) and humpless bulls (*Bos taurus*). The presence of both varieties suggests that early inhabitants were familiar with different breeds of cattle, possibly indicating domestication and selective breeding practices (Sharma & Tiwari, 2001). These representations align with archaeological evidence from Neolithic settlements, which highlight the domestication of cattle for agricultural and economic purposes (Possehl, 2002).

The bulls at Bhimbetka are illustrated in various contexts, offering valuable insights into human-animal interactions. Some paintings depict bulls alongside humans, suggesting their involvement in daily activities such as herding, ploughing, or ritualistic practices. These depictions may indicate the significance of bulls in pastoral economies, where they were essential for agriculture and transport. Other paintings portray bulls in groups, often alongside other animals such as deer, wild boars, and elephants. Such scenes suggest a broader ecological understanding among early communities, possibly representing either wild herds or domesticated cattle within a structured pastoral setting (Neumayer, 2010).

In certain shelters, bulls are illustrated in dynamic motion, depicted with exaggerated musculature and horns, emphasizing their strength and power. These artistic choices might indicate the symbolic or ritualistic value of bulls, where they could have been revered as representations of fertility, strength, or protective deities (Agrawal, 1982). The artistic styles vary across different time periods, with earlier paintings being more naturalistic, while later ones tend to be more stylized and schematic, reflecting evolving artistic conventions and cultural beliefs (Pandey, 1993).

The widespread depiction of bulls in Bhimbetka's rock art suggests their centrality in prehistoric life, serving economic, social, and potentially religious functions. These paintings not only document the presence of cattle in early Indian societies but also provide a visual record of human adaptation, domestication practices, and evolving artistic traditions. The study of such imagery, in conjunction with archaeological findings, helps reconstruct.



Figure 1: Painting of group of bulls with man at Bhimbetka Rock Shelters, Raisen, Madhya Pradesh



Figure 2: Bhimbetka Rock Shelters, Raisen



Figure 3: Bhimbetka Rock Shelters: Sevan men with bull

Gawilgarh

The Gawilgarh rock paintings, located in the Betul district of Madhya Pradesh, are among the most important and fascinating prehistoric art sites in Central India. These paintings were discovered by **Nandini Sahu** and **Dr. Prabas Sahu**, whose comprehensive research has drawn significant attention to the site. Their findings, published in various research papers, have greatly contributed to understanding the region's ancient cultural practices. The Gawilgarh rock art provides essential insights into early societies in the Indian subcontinent, particularly in terms of their relationship with animals, nature, and spiritual beliefs.

One of the standout features of the Gawilgarh site is the presence of **engraved bulls**, which is an uncommon representation in Indian rock art. Unlike the usual painted images, these bulls are **carved into the rock surface**, demonstrating a different artistic technique. This engraving method adds complexity to the understanding of prehistoric art in the region, suggesting that the people of Gawilgarh experimented with various forms of artistic expression. Alongside the engravings, **painted bulls** have also been discovered, further highlighting the crucial role of cattle in the lives of the early inhabitants. These bulls are often depicted with **exaggerated horns** and **muscular bodies**, likely symbolizing **strength, fertility**, or the **spiritual significance** of the animal in their culture.

A particularly intriguing feature at Gawilgarh is a panel that displays a **superimposition of images** in three distinct layers. The lowest layer shows a **grazing antelope**, a common motif in prehistoric art that likely represents the wildlife early humans interacted with. The second layer features two rows of **fish**, which could symbolize an aquatic environment or be associated with fertility and abundance. The topmost layer of the panel depicts **humpless bulls**, a contrast to the more commonly seen **humped bulls** in other Central Indian rock art. This layering of images provides a remarkable view of how artistic styles evolved over time and reflects the changing interactions between early humans and their environment. The prominence of bulls, both domesticated and symbolic, in these paintings further emphasizes their significance in early cultural and spiritual practices.

The Gawilgarh rock paintings, with their combination of **engraved and painted bulls** as well as depictions of various animals and human figures, offer crucial insights into early human life. They highlight the diverse and evolving nature of rock art in Central India, shedding light on the social, spiritual, and environmental contexts in which these artworks were created. Ongoing research and exploration of this site are likely to uncover further aspects of ancient Indian culture, enriching our understanding of its rich artistic legacy.



Figure 4: Humpless Bull, Kund Rock Shelter, Gawilgarh, Betul District



Figure 5: Panel showing Superimposition in three tiers, earliest depicting connected a grazing antelope, two rows of Fish, and the third depicting a Humpless bulls



Figure 6: Engraved Humped Bull



Figure 7: Humped bull and Humpless bull



Figure 8: Humped bull and Humpless bull

Raigarh (Chhattisgarh)

Raigarh district (Lat. 21°53'50.6" N, Long. 83°23'42.0" E) is the headquarters of the Bilaspur division in the state of Chhattisgarh, covering a total area of 6,527.44 square kilometers. Located on the border of Orissa and Jharkhand, Raigarh district lies in the northeastern part of Chhattisgarh. It is surrounded by the Satpura and Vindhya mountain ranges. The rock paintings and rock shelters in Raigarh district are significant archaeological sites. These paintings were first discovered by C. W. Anderson in 1910 (Anderson 1918: 298-306). Currently, about 22 additional rock shelters have been discovered, spanning prehistoric to historical periods. Among these is the Ongna rock shelter. The researcher has completed exploration and documentation of this rock shelter, with fieldwork fully concluded. The rock paintings found here offer insights into the culture and environment of the area.

Ongna (Lekhamaada)

Ongna (Lekhamaada) (Lat. 23° 26'18" N, long. 83° 14'39" E) is located about 70 km north of Raigarh. This large rock shelter (14 m x 5 m x 5 m) contains more than 100 rock paintings. The paintings depict bulls, human figures, and dance scenes. Bulls and cows are commonly seen in the rock paintings of this shelter (Pathak, Meenakshi Dubey, and J. Clottes, 2017).

This is the largest shelter, with a height of 5.70 meters, a width of 31 meters, and a depth of more than 10 meters. The shape of the rock shelter is oval. Rock paintings have been made on the rock shelter's surface, covering a width of 12.20 meters. The direction of all the rock shelters is northwest. The highest number of rock paintings has been found in this shelter. Most of the paintings are done in dark and light red ochre. Evidence of superimposition has also been found in this rock shelter.

A triangular-shaped human figure is depicted in dark red, with grazing humped and humpless bulls shown in a line. Two bulls are visible on the right side of the human figure; the outer one is humped, while the inner one is humpless. The entire composition is linear.

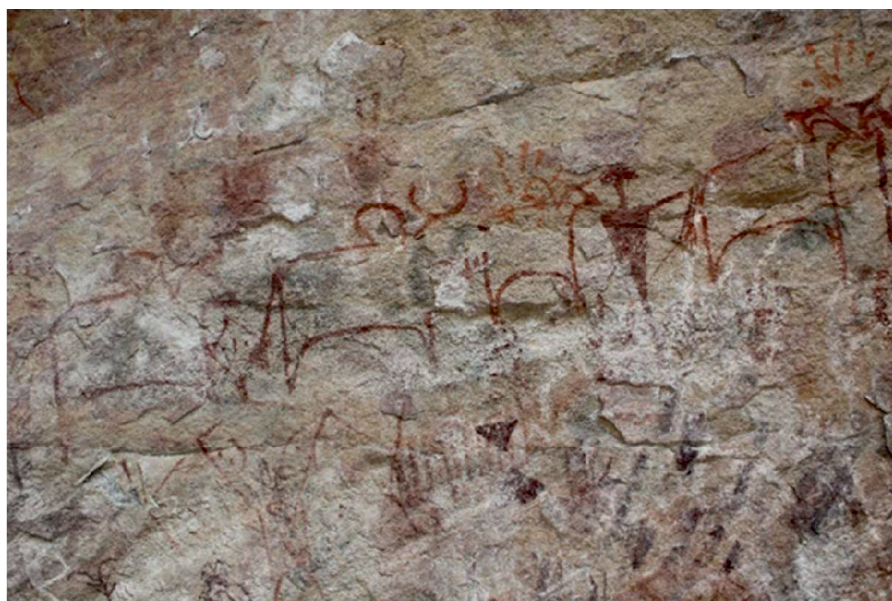


Figure 9: Four bulls and a human, Ongna

A handprint is also found just above the inner bull, overlapping the bull in the composition. On the left side of the human figure, there are markings of two bulls, where the inner bull faces outward, and the outer bull faces inward, suggesting they are facing each other. This seems to provide authentic evidence of animal husbandry. Below, there is a rectangular decoration made of lines arranged in a square pattern. Two human figures are depicted in a standing posture. Another depiction shows three circles created with the help of a vertical line. A double line is used in the upper and lower circles, while four lines are used in the middle circle.

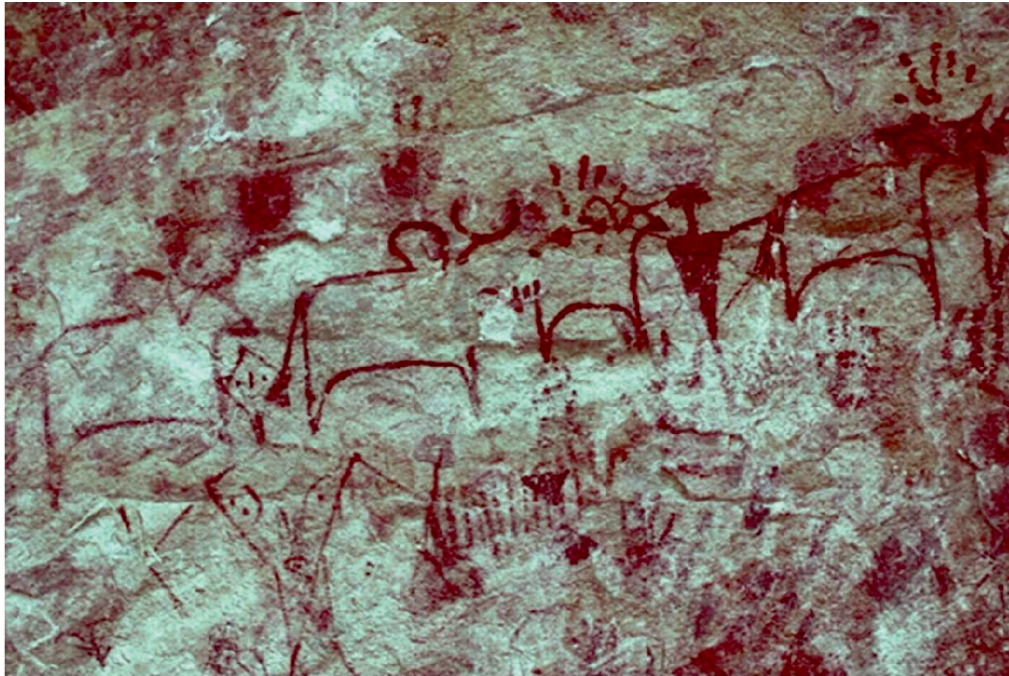


Figure 10: Four bulls and a human (Image with D stretch)

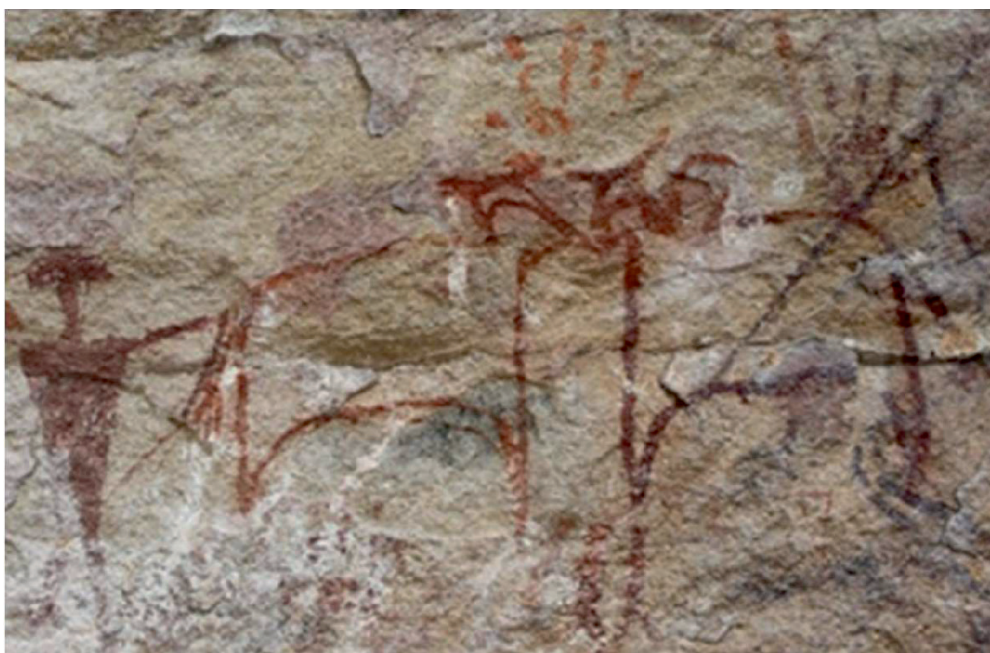


Figure 11: Four bulls and a human



Figure 12: Four bulls and a human (Image with D stretch)

Conclusion

The rock art of Central India shows many pictures of bulls, highlighting how important these animals were to early human societies. Bulls were key to farming, trade, and culture, and they had special meanings for people. It is not easy to say if the bulls in the art are linked to Shiva's vahana, Nandi, but their frequent appearance shows they were highly respected. These artworks show the creativity and beliefs of ancient people and help us understand the strong connection between humans and animals in history.

The bull motifs in Central Indian rock art function as a cultural bridge, allowing us to understand how ancient communities interpreted their surroundings and expressed their beliefs. These artistic expressions highlight the deep emotional and symbolic relationship between humans and animals in early societies. Therefore, the bull stands as a timeless symbol—rooted in survival, enriched by ritual and spirituality, and preserved through the enduring creativity of early human art.

References

- Anderson, C.W. 1918. *Rock Paintings in Singanpur*, *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, 4(2): 298-306.
- Agrawal, D.P. (1982). *The Archaeology of India*. Curzon Press.
- Agrawal, D.P. (1982). *The Archaeology of India*. Curzon Press.
- Bhattacharya-Sahu, Nandini and Prabash Sahu (2014a): *Decorated Rock Shelters of Gawilgarh Hills, Betul District, Madhya Pradesh*, in B.L. Malla (ed.) *Rock Art Studies- Concepts, Methodology, Context, Documentation and Conservation*, IGNCA, New Delhi and Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 271-298.
- Bhattacharya-Sahu, Nandini and Prabash Sahu (2017): *Rock Art of Gawilgadhd Hills: Recent Discoveries*, in K.N. Dixit and B.R. Mani (ed.) *Puratattva* No. 47, (p. 47) 131-137).

- Bhattacharya-Sahu, Nandini and Prabash Sahu, 2017: *Rock Art in the Satpuras Recent Discoveries in the Gawilgarh Hills of Betul District, Madhya Pradesh, Rock Art in India*, New Delhi, B.R. Publishing Corporation (pub. no. 103-104)
- Dubey-Pathak M. and J. Clottes. 2017a. *Powerful Paintings. Rock Art and Tribal Art in Chhattisgarh*. Bloomsbury India: New Delhi.
- Marshall, J. (1931). *Mohenjo-Daro and the Indus Civilization*. Arthur Probsthain.
- Neumayer, E. (2010). *Prehistoric Rock Art of India*. Oxford University Press.
- Possehl, G.L. (2002). *The Indus Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective*. Rowman Altamira.
- Sahu, Prabash, 2014: *Decorated Rock Shelters of the Gawilgadh Hills*" in Ajit Kumar (ed.) *Rock Art: Recent Researches and New Perspectives* Vol. I, 221-234.
- Sharma, A., & Tiwari, A.P. (2001). *Rock Art in Central India*. Aryan Books International.
- Wakankar, V.S., & Brooks, R.R.R. (1976). *Stone Age Paintings in India*. Mankameshwar Press.
- Neumayer, E. (2010). *Prehistoric Rock Art of India*. Oxford University Press.
- Pandey, S.N. (1993). *Rock Art of India: Paintings and Engravings*. Aryan Books International.
- Possehl, G.L. (2002). *The Indus Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective*. Rowman Altamira.
- Sharma, A., & Tiwari, A.P. (2001). *Rock Art in Central India*. Aryan Books International.
- Wakankar, V.S., & Brooks, R.R.R. (1976). *Stone Age Paintings in India*. Mankameshwar Press.