

REPORTS ON RASI-2004 INTERNATIONAL ROCK ART CONGRESS, AGRA, 28 NOVEMBER TO 02 DECEMBER, 2004 AND POST CONGRESS FIELD TRIPS

AGRA 2004 : A MAGNIFICENT ROCK ART CONGRESS

I trust that the delegates of the tenth congress of IFRAO, held by the Rock Art Society of India in Agra from 28 November to 2 December 2004, appreciate that we cannot make a habit of this standard of hospitality at future rock art conferences. The one thousand employees of the Jaypee Palace Hotel, the most luxurious in Agra, were spoiling us mercilessly, and I would argue that it is not in the interest of rock art research to pamper rock art researchers out of their minds — they might become accustomed to this. And I hope that future IFRAO congresses will not follow the Agra example and carry delegates into the lecture hall in sedan chairs carried by four bearers in magnificent traditional costumes.

Oh yes, and the Congress, too, was quite a treat. First and foremost, the organisational aspects reminded me of a Swiss clock: operational perfection seemed to be the norm. Despite the usual last-minute changes to the academic sessions, these adjustments were made with a minimum of fuss and programming was seamless. Apart from the opening and closing plenary sessions, there were three continuous parallel symposia, totalling about 140 presentations. Bearing in mind that two of the five congress days consisted of plenary sessions, this number of papers demanded a well-paced delivery. In my view, the academic standard of papers given was such that our hopes for an increasingly sophisticated scientific discipline in our field seem entirely justified. Most presentations were of excellent standard, and the large range of topics covered by the twelve symposia is symptomatic of the diversification the discipline has experienced in recent years.

The congress began with the Padmashri Dr V. S. Wakankar Memorial Lecture, given this year by Robert G. Bednarik. The first lecture in this series



Fig. 1. Shri S. Jaipal Reddy, Honb'le Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting and Culture, Government of India inaugurating the RASI-2004 Congress by lighting a lamp.

of annual events to honour the father of Indian rock art studies had also been given by Bednarik — in Ujjain in 1990. The 2004 lecture was entitled 'The lasting legacy of V. S. Wakankar', describing how sixteen years after Professor Wakankar's death, his work lives on in the Rock Art Society of India. This was followed by a couple of rock art films, one from New Zealand and one from Borneo. Next, the event was officially opened by Shri Jaipal Reddy, the Honourable Union Minister for Information, Broadcasting and Culture, and Ms Neena Ranjan, the Secretary of the Department of Culture, Government of India. This was followed by the welcoming address of the Congress Chairman, Dr Giriraj Kumar, the President and Editor of RASI, and the Secretary's report, given by Dr G. L. Badam.

In the afternoon began the first three parallel sessions, which continued on the third congress day. The second day was taken up by a substantial plenary session in the morning, dedicated to the Early Indian Petroglyphs Project (EIP; cf. Kumar et al. 2002). This consisted of three presentations by three of the principal researchers of this major



Fig. 2. Dr. K.K. Chakravarty (IAS), Member Secretary, IGNC, New Delhi addressing the RASI-Congress. Sitting on the dais from left are Dr. G.L. Badam, Mr. Robert G. Bednarik, Ms. Neena Ranjan, Secretary, Culture and Shri S. Jaipal Reddy, Honb'le Union Minister, Govt. of India

current and ongoing project, which addresses questions of rock art dating in India, most especially the age estimation of the world's earliest known rock art. Petroglyphs at a few sites in central India belong to Lower and Middle Palaeolithic traditions, coinciding at least at two sites with the use of Acheulian handaxes. The EIP Project also endeavours to provide a better chronological framework for the Palaeolithic cultures of the subcontinent of India. This is currently one of the most important rock art projects in the world, and this plenary session was intended as the event's centrepiece. It was also the main reason, albeit not the only reason, for the naming of the congress: 'Rock Art Research: Changing Paradigms'. The first of these plenary presentations, given by Dr G. Kumar, addressed the current and ongoing excavations at one of the two EIP principal sites, Daraki-Chattan; the second, by R. G. Bednarik, reported the most recent dating results, from optically stimulated fluorescence analyses of the sediments at Daraki-Chattan and Bhimbetka as well as microerosion results from other sites. The third paper, presented by Professor Alan Watchman, reported the first ever AMS radiocarbon dating results from Indian rock art.

The afternoon of the second congress day was taken up by visits of the two world-famous

monuments of Agra, the Red Fort and the Taj Mahal. On the third day, the three parallel symposia continued and congress attendees were able to choose from a smorgasbord of presentations and subjects. Symposium topics included the traditional staple topics of global perspectives in rock art studies, new discoveries, rock art dating, conservation and management — but also some new issues, such as the interpretation of rock art and its artistic interpretation, the depiction of animals in palaeoart, and two forward-looking symposia. One of the latter concerned the desired status of the discipline in 2025, the other addressed the future of the Bhimbetka site complex in Madhya Pradesh which has recently been accorded World Heritage status. These papers occupied most of the next three days, and ended with a plenary summing up by Dr K. K. Chakravarty.

There were far too many highlights to begin listing them individually, but one of the most notable developments apparent at this event was perhaps the improvement in Indian work over the previous decade. In 1994, at the rock art session of the New Delhi World Archaeological Congress, most Indian papers were still simple show-and-tell presentations. At Agra, however, the effects of the work of RASI were clearly evident, with many scientifically impeccable and well-documented papers given by Indian participants. This fairly dramatic change augurs well for the Indian school of rock art studies, and congratulations to the leadership of RASI are certainly in order on that account, as well as on the impressive organisational work and congress infrastructure. All sessions were recorded and teams of technical staff were on hand at each of the three sessions. Media conferences were well organised and certainly effective. A small exhibition and poster centre was well attended. Meal breaks were sumptuous affairs on a large lawn, just outside the congress venue, with a great variety of delicacies on offer every day. As acknowledged above, we were pampered as we had never been before, at a rock art event. The luxurious surroundings added a special flavour to the congress. The venue, a large luxury hotel and convention centre, consisted of a sprawling complex

of imposing buildings clad with red quartzite outside and white marble inside — a veritable 21st century palace. All of this together resulted in a rock art conference such as the discipline had not seen before: thoroughly organised and presented with an aura of luxury and grace. It was an event those of us who participated will remember for a long time to come.

And then there were the field trips. To travel in India is fascinating even for the average tourist, but rock art sites tend to be in relatively remote places and we had the opportunity of seeing parts of the country not yet affected by international tourism. Indian rock paintings are among the most numerous and most spectacular in the world, and sites such as the superbly preserved Raamchhaya shelters in the sandstone cliffs near Raisen, the extensive galleries of Chaturbhujnath Nala in the Chambal valley and the world-renowned rock art complex of hundreds of painted shelters at Bhimbetka, south of Bhopal, were among the main destinations of the fieldtrips. Many of the congress delegates also availed themselves of the opportunity of visiting the Palaeolithic excavation at Daraki-Chattan, one of the main sites of the EIP Project, to view some of the evidence for the earliest known rock art in the world under the guidance of the site's principal excavator, Dr G. Kumar. The trench was kept open especially for the occasion, and the numerous exfoliated rock slabs bearing cupules — found under the site's Acheulian occupation deposit — have now been examined by many Indian and foreign scholars. Highlights of this calibre, together with the ambience of many sites and the general charm of the Indian countryside ensured that the fieldtrips were valuable experiences, and were well appreciated by those who participated.

The Agra congress included associated events such as the Annual Meeting of RASI, the Business Meeting of the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations (IFRAO) and several media conferences. Its coverage by the electronic and printed media, both in Agra and later in Bhopal, was as magnificent as any aspect of this event. This has no doubt added to public awareness of the



Fig. 3. Dr. K.K. Basa, Director IGRMS, Bhopal addressing the RASI-Congress. Sitting on the dais from left are Dr. G.L. Badam, Mr. K.K. Chakravarty (IAS), Dr. Giriraj Kumar and Mr. Robert G. Bednarik.

importance of rock art and its preservation, as well as to cultivating an improved sensitivity of the public service to the need of affording the required attention to matters concerning ancient cultural heritage. Already there have been noticeable changes in this area, prompted no doubt especially by the World Heritage listing of the Bhimbetka complex, initiated by me (Bednarik 1994; Ray and Ramanathan 2002). As reported at the congress, it has been found during 2004 that there are difficulties in coping with the substantial increase of visitation prompted by the listing. The maximum number of visitors has had to be limited to 1600 persons per day and Bhimbetka is thus already one of the most heavily visited rock art sites in the world. Visitor facilities, however, remain about the same as they were prior to 2003, when public visitation was quite negligible. It is therefore evident that there are major changes in the public profile of rock art underway in India, and again this can to a large extent be attributed to the tenacity of RASI. If there was one thing every foreign participant of the Agra congress was clear about, it was that RASI, under the leadership of its founder and architect, Giriraj Kumar, has become one of the success stories of IFRAO. It was therefore most appropriate that, on the occasion of this event, the presidency of IFRAO passed to RASI. It is precisely this policy of IFRAO, of promoting effectiveness in rock art studies and preservation in this unique way, that accounts for

the continuing vitality of the Federation. As *outgoing President of IFRAO, I take this opportunity* to congratulate Dr Kumar on his appointment, and on what I regard as *one of the most auspicious IFRAO congresses ever held* — and certainly the most sumptuous. (Pl. also see figures on cover pages).

Robert G. Bednarik
Convener, IFRAO

References

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MINISTER'S INAUGURAL SPEECH

Shri S. Jaipal Reddy, Hon'ble Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting and Culture, Government of India inaugurated the Congress in Deewan-E-Aam of the Hotel Jaypee Papalce on 28 November 2004. His inaugural speech has been given below for the readers of Purakala:

"I extend a warm welcome to the delegates of the RASI-2004 International Rock Art Congress, Agra organized by the Rock Art Society of India in collaboration with the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal, and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi.

Rock art forms the earliest manifestation of human visual creations. It is a global phenomenon. It can serve as a tool for developing a better understanding and a spirit of cooperation and peaceful relations among the people of the world. From this perspective alone it makes good sense to give emphasis on the scientific research on rock art.

India is one of the three countries having the richest treasures of rock art in the world.

The Bhimbetka complex of rock shelters

discovered by Dr V.S. Wakankar near Bhopal in 1957 has been declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in July 2003. But now there is a new development to be reported, the work and results of an international team of researchers called the *Early Indian Petroglyphs Project. It is a source of* much personal satisfaction for me to endorse the *work of this successful team, which has just demonstrated the incredibly ancient origins of* culture in India.

We have long been accustomed to hearing about the sophistication of Indian culture in historic times, but the research team working on the early rock art of Madhya Pradesh has shown that this distinction does not extend back just thousands of years, or even tens of thousands of years. It can be traced back hundreds of thousands of years. Until now, most archaeologists in the world had believed that humans still lacked language at that stage of their development. The scientists who have now shown that the earliest known rock art in the world is in central India have overnight changed the landscape of global cultural evolution. They have also drawn attention to the enormous research potential in this field. I applaud their work and their dedication.

My enthusiasm for these sensational results prompts me to suggest that it is time for the Archaeological Survey of India to establish a special section dealing specifically with prehistoric rock art and with the Palaeolithic period of India, the Older Stone Age. Agencies to address such topics as the study, conservation and protection of rock art should perhaps also be formed in the IGNCA and IGRMS. These subjects will become increasingly important as the world focuses its attention on the very early cultural development in India.

Similarly, I propose that the protection of the sites in question be considered adequately. I understand that in the order of twenty sites are at present known in a small area near Gandhi Sagar in Mandsaur district, Madhya Pradesh, all of which may form part of this very earliest art evidence. This is a remote area and it should be possible to establish a National Park for their preservation and

management. That potential needs to be investigated immediately. The research team must be provided with the means to complete its important survey, excavation and dating work, which is the ultimate source of this newfound pride in the ancient cultures of India. Places of such importance as the oldest art sites in the world are national shrines; they are to be well protected and looked after. I consider it to be our obligation to preserve what is left of the cultural heritage of India, which we now know extends back further in time than that of any other region of the world.

The ongoing Early Indian Petroglyphs Project is one of the best examples of international cooperation and scientific spirit in this field. It is a joint venture of the Rock Art Society of India, the Australian Rock Art Research Association, the Archaeological Survey of India and the Indian Council of Historical Research, and many scientific laboratories in India and Australia, including the Institute of Physics, Bhubneswar. It is testing the antiquity of the earliest known rock art in the world, found in Daraki-Chattan Cave in Chambal valley and in the Auditorium Cave at Bhimbetka. Their antiquity extends back five to ten times as far as that of oldest European rock art, which is nearly 33,000 years old.

I endorse this work fully and I pledge my ministry's support for this outstanding project. It is a source of personal and national pride that India has so suddenly emerged as a leading country in this area of scientific endeavour. I congratulate the Rock Art Society of India for organizing this important event on rock art heritage in India, and also to the collaborating organizations to extend their support to make it a successful Congress. I trust the deliberations for five days in this Congress will be able to set a future vision and a course of intensive research for the benefit of entire humanity. I welcome the delegates of the Congress once again. Thank you."

S. Jaipal Reddy

*Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting and
Culture, Government of India*

28 November 2004, Agra

IMPRESSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT THE POST-CONGRESS FIELD TRIPS

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE ON ROCK ART CAR-ICOMOS
COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL D'ART RUPESTRE

Dear Dr. G. Kumar

19, December, 2004

The highlight of Field Trip B, which you organized as part of the 2004, 10th IFRAO International Rock Art Congress in Agra, was undoubtedly the visits to the Chaturbhujnath Nala sites in the Chambal Valley (Madhya Pradesh). Those sites extend over several miles on both sides of the river. Due to the limited time we had and even if we spent about eight hours there in two days-thanks to a re-arrangement of our schedule-, we only saw a small part of them. From what we have seen, however, I can affirm that they are of world importance and particularly significant, for the following reasons:

- the rock art is situated in a very beautiful unspoiled scenery, in a succession of shallow rock shelters strewn along the river; as always, the environment is a most important part of rock art;
- that environment is being monitored and preserved within the Gandhi Sagar Game Sanctuary, by the Forest officers and staff, which means that the best conditions exist for its continuing conservation. I shall add that I hardly saw any examples of vandalism such as graffiti which could have
- expected in such an open place;
- the very long lines of shelters and their accessibility have made it possible to make thousands of rock paintings over rather vast distances; others will no doubt be discovered in the future. This makes Chaturbhujnath Nala one of the longest and most important rock art galleries in the world;
- the paintings themselves extend over a very long period of time (nearly 10,000 years, since the Mesolithic) and exhibit marked stylistic and thematic differences: those sites provide an invaluable record of the cultural beliefs and



Fig. 1. Rock painting, Chaturbhujnath Nala, Chambal Valley

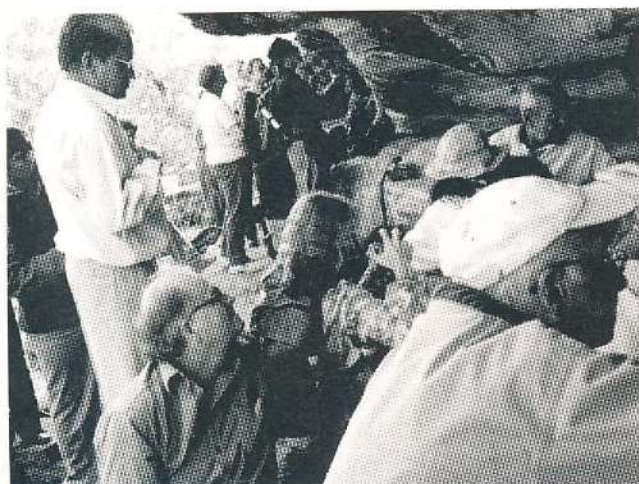


Fig. 2. RASI-2004 Congress delegates studying and discussing rock art at Chaturbhujnath Nala in Chambal Valley.

practices of the local people and must be considered as a precious and outstanding archive;

- many of the paintings are superbly rendered and as «good» as any great work of art.

Consequently, I respectfully suggest two recommendations to the Relevant Indian authorities:

- 1) that the place should be turned into a National Park, which it most certainly deserves and which will ensure its continuing protection, with the help of the existing structure of the Forest Service;
- 2) that, in a second stage, steps should be taken to

ask officially for the site to be put on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

As to the study and monitoring of the sites themselves, I would recommend:

- to have an aerial map of the area in order to precisely pinpoint the succession of painted shelters on it; I have noticed that the shelters have already been given numbers: those numbers could thus be put on the aerial photos or maps derived from them;
- the first recording stage, in my opinion, would be to make an inventory of the art shelter after shelter, by means of descriptive forms (a form model should be set up in accordance with the specifics of the Chambal Valley rock art); those forms can easily be computerized and thus provide a useful data base; a photographic survey should accompany the filling-in of forms;
- the work already in progress about dating the art, working out its superimpositions and establishing the succession of its styles is of paramount importance;
- special research should be made with the local relevant population to see if traditions have persisted and if some aspects of the art can be explained by those traditions. This, in my opinion, is a particularly important and urgent part of the work;
- as to the visits to the sites themselves, they should be restricted to the most spectacular shelters, with small groups (5/6 persons per group) under strict supervision.

I shall add that I shall always be glad to collaborate if this could Prove useful.

Best Regards,

Jean Clottes
 Conservateur général du Patrimoine (Honorary)
 Former President of the International Committee on Rock Art
 National Coordinator (France) Former President of CAR11, rue
 du Fourcat09000 Foix, France

VISIT OF RASI-2004 CONGRESS DELEGATES AT BHIMBETKA AND SITES AROUND IT

Following the International Rock Art Congress held at Agra from 28 November to 02 December 2004 nearly 60 delegates from various parts of the world visited the painted rock shelter complex of Bhimbetka, Raisen and Sanchi from 4 to 6 December, 2004. Since its inscription in the UNESCO list of World Heritage Monuments on 5th July 2003 Bhimbetka has achieved much more attention than earlier. This visit of renowned scholars from many countries of the world added to the momentum of increasing prestige of the site.

Spread over nearly 10 km in length and 3 km in width the dense vegetation growth around the rock shelters and favourable climate beckoned each scholar to have a deeper look into the shelters. There are over 750 rock shelters spread in the cluster known as Bhimbetka Group of rock shelters from Bineka, Rang Mahal, Bhoranwali, Bhimbetka (proper) to Lakhajuar East and Lakhajuar West. In view of shortage of time and to give the best among these rock shelters the scholars were guided to the 15 Painted Rock Shelters at Bhimbetka proper in the first session. In the second session the delegates were taken to the rock shelter groups at Rang Mahal and Bhoranwali. At Bhimbetka besides providing enumeration of the paintings, Dr Narayan Vyas who escorted the visitors also gave details of the excavations with a view to give a holistic appraisal of the paintings, its contexts and relevance to dating. Pertinently, the recent project on Early Indian Petroglyphs, being carried out as a joint effort by RASI, AURA and ASI deals with this investigation. Dr Vyas gave detailed account of the investigations with reference to the cupules at Auditorium Cave. The cupules on Chief's Rock, situated in the centre of Auditorium Cave, at the end of the eastern tunnel, it was explained as evidence of the earliest human visual creations on rock surface. The taphonomic logic, which is understood as 'given that all types of art in diverse materials could have been done earlier the types that survived by virtue of it being more durable does not mean that they were later or that they were the only ones made earlier'. The

cupules threw light on the taphonomic Logic. The scholars were fascinated visiting these Paleolithic cupules and recommended that a battery of scientific tests on them will strengthen their status as the Pleistocene petroglyphs.

The scholars were amazed by the sheer quantity of paintings at the Zoo rock. The sequence of paintings from Mesolithic, proto historic to early historic was a cornucopia of themes and styles. In the Boar rock, the last of the shelters that is accessible for lay visitors, the gigantic settings and the large boar chasing the diminutive human being, evoked several queries. Julie Drew from Australia asked regarding the possibilities of connecting this art with the aboriginals presently inhabiting the area. Incidentally, some of the rock shelters in Bhimbetka region show paintings of tribal dances. Although these paintings are not so early but it definitely underlines the point that the dance forms signify the increasingly complex mechanism employed by tribal societies for maintaining harmony.

In the second session after lunch the visitors treaded on foot up to the Rang Mahal hill. The Rang Mahal, which means Painted Palace, was for the scholars a veritable treasure house of paintings spanning from the Mesolithic to the Mediaeval. The Mesolithic painting of the dancer, besides other ornate human figures, received the maximum



Fig. 3. RASI-2004 Congress delegates studying rock art at Bhimbetka.

attention of the visitors. The battle scenes, processions and dance scenes of the early historic times also were of great interest to them in view of the variety of dress styles including headdresses, besides ornamentations. The continuity of painting activity, noticed even up to the mediaeval times was represented by the figures of elephant in white and the polychrome paintings.

The last site to be visited within the Bhimbetka Group was the Bhoranwali Hill Range. In spite of the uphill task even the septuagenarians climbed the hill and saw the rock shelters on the scarp side of the hill. The visitors were impressed by the range of colours and subject matter besides the time span covered by the paintings. The green dancers are considered Upper Palaeolithic. Most of the scholars were aware of these paintings and themselves asked the escorting team to lead to these spots. Jean Clottes asked how these paintings could be dated to the Upper Palaeolithic period? It was explained by Dr Narayan Vyas, that besides the fact that the paintings underlie all the paintings, the colour nodules of these paintings were found in the Upper Paleolithic contexts during the course of excavations. The scholars asked several questions and made their own observations regarding the depiction of fish, snakes, deer and other animals and the comparative paucity of human depiction especially that of the Mesolithic Period. The troupe returned back to the base camp at Bhimbetka. Here they also came to see the traditional works of art made on the walls by using clay as done from the historic times.

The visit of the global troupe of scholars has definitely increased the prestige of the site and has added further impetus to the academic research of the site from different parts of the world. These would improve the understanding of the site and the development of the human kind as seen at Bhimbetka.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT BY PRESIDENT, RASI

I am grateful to the following organizations and individuals to extend their help in organizing and preparation of the RASI-2004 Congress:

The Congress Advisory Board and Organising Committee, most specially Mr Robert G. Bednarik, Dr K.K. Chakravarty, Dr S.P. Gupta, Dr R.C. Agrawal, Prof. K.K. Basa, Dr Ashvini Kumar Sharma, Dr D. Dayalan, Dr S. Pradhan, Dr P.K. Bhatt, Dr B.L. Bamoria, Dr Alok Tripathi, Sarvashri N.K. Samadhia, S.B. Ota, K.K. Muhammed, R.K. Agrawal, Anshuman Pandey and Dilip Padhi.

- ◆ The Symposia Chairpersons
- ◆ Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal
- ◆ Archaeological Survey of India
- ◆ Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts
- ◆ Department of Culture, Govt. of India
- ◆ Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi
- ◆ UTI Bank, Agra (Kumar 2004).

Further, impressed by the contribution of the Rock Art Society of India in promotion of scientific rock art research and its genuine needs the following delegates and organizations extended their help for furthering its cause during the Congress:

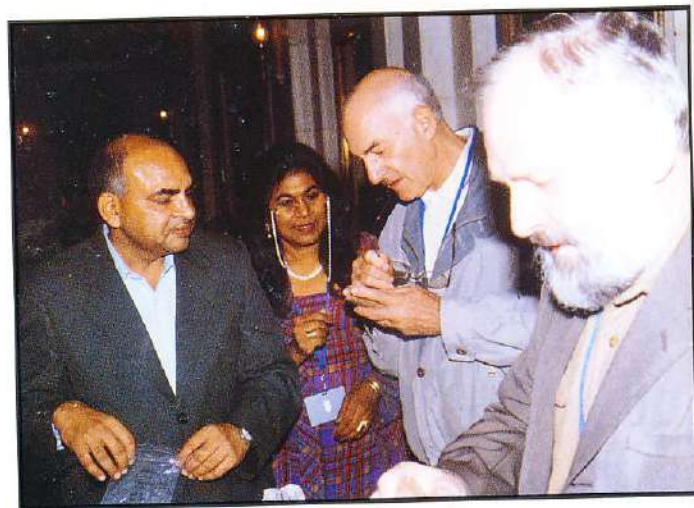
Dr S.P. Gupta, Delhi, Mrs Elfriede.K. Bednarik, AURA, Melbourne, Australia and Prof. Bud Hampton, Colorado.

I, on behalf of the Rock Art Society of India and personally thanks a lot for their timely support.

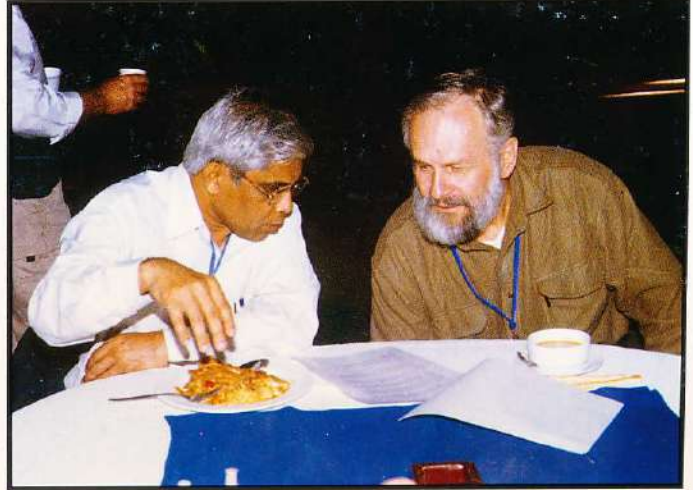
Giriraj Kumar
President RASI

Reference

KUMAR, G. 2004. *The RASI-2004 International Rock Art Congress, Agra: Programme and Congress Handbook.*



Some of the reflections of the inauguration, addresses, Dr. V.S. Wakankar Memorial Lecture and discussions in the RASI-2004 International Rock Art Congress, Agra, India.



Some of the reflections of the discussions and happy moments in the RASI-2004 International Rock Art Congress, Agra, India.



Some of the delegates of the RASI-2004 International Rock Art Congress, Agra, India.