

Bhimbetka – A newly declared World Heritage Site

Bhimbetka (Figure 1a), a spectacular ancient rock site suddenly came into limelight in the year 2002, when it was included in the list of World Heritage Sites by UNESCO on the recommendation of the Govt. of India. Bhimbetka (Figure 1b) is situated 2 km southwest of the tribal village, Bhiyanpura in Raisen district, 45 km from Bhopal, the capital of Madhya Pradesh, lying between 22°56'05"N and 77°36'41"E. It encompasses an area of 12,172 ha with a core of 1832 ha, and falls within Ratapani Wildlife Sanctuary.

Bhimbetka is a magnificent repository of rock paintings within a number of natural rock shelters. It symbolizes a blending of antiquity, art and environment. This contiguous area conserves all the phases of the earliest settlement of man, of which, some are visible on the surface in the form of paintings from Mesolithic to the Mediaeval era and some are hidden under the undisturbed layers from the Paleolithic to

the historical periods, as evidenced by archaeological surveys. Bhimbetka, a rare 'living site' in its natural environment is unique not only because of its prosperity in art and antiquity, but also because it has not remained concealed in the darkness of time. The area is surrounded by dwellings of tribes, mainly Gond *adivasis*. The name 'Bhimbetka' has been given to it because of a myth that it was the 'sitting place of Bhim', a brave Pandava. According to local dwellers, some of the paintings and impressions of palms in the rock shelters of Bhimbetka were made by the Pandavas during their banishment.

As the cultural core is surrounded by a rich cover of primeval forest, it forms an integral part of environment and biodiversity. The forest is typically of tropical dry deciduous type dominated by *Wrightia tinctoria* R. Br., *Holarrhena pubescens* (Buch.-Ham.) Wall. ex G. Don, *Mitragyna parviflora* (Roxb.) Korth. and

Chloroxylon swietenia DC. in drier places and *Syzygium heyneanum* (Duthie) Wall. ex Gamble and *Terminalia arjuna* (Roxb. ex DC.) Wt. & Arn. along the streams. The forest communities are frequently interrupted by scrub jungles, grassy localities and also barren sites, which are often occupied by huge flattened boulders. The forest shelters a number of valuable medicinal and other economically potential plants and wild animals, predominantly a variety of insects and rodents. Ironically, the denudation of natural forest cover and illicit felling of trees continue to be a problem, though the Department of Forests attempts to enforce strict protection. The loss of tree cover would directly affect the rock shelters and paintings, because trees provide the essential buffer to them.

A majority of the tribal populace derives its sustenance and livelihood from the forest. A vast amount of knowledge on the multifarious uses of plants is preserved among these societies through folklore. Herds of livestock are seen to roam freely within the protected areas, which causes enormous loss to biodiversity. Over-exploitation of valuable medicinal plants by traders through local *adivasis* has resulted in a decline in the population of several medicinal plants of high potential. Thus it is time to take stock of existing biodiversity with a conservation perspective.

National Botanical Research Institute, Lucknow has been entrusted with the task to study the floristic diversity of Bhimbetka forest, including lower plants like lichens, Bryophytes and Pteridophytes and to assess the economic potential. A preliminary survey was conducted from 9 to 12 July 2004, with co-operation and financial assistance from the Archaeological Survey of India, Bhopal. To conserve a large complex site such as Bhimbetka, a holistic approach and a time-targetted management plan is necessary so that its multi-dimensional characters could be retained.

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Figure 1. a, The main rock shelter at Bhimbetka; b, View of Bhimbetka forest.