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NEPALI PAINTINGS: A DEPARTURE FROM RELIGIOUS CONTENTS TO SECULAR SUBJECT MATTERS

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Nepali paintings are religious since they are based on Hindu and Buddhist myths. Manuscript illuminations and *paubhas*, the examples of religious paintings, have magical and mystical contents. Characters of myths have been portrayed and mythical stories have been narrated in visual form. There are a series of changes from traditional Nepali paintings to contemporary works. In painting, secular elements are introduced through didactic visual narratives from *Hitopadesha* manuscript. The moral lessons are taught through animal fables. Early *paubhas* are fully religious but later *paubhas* include portraits of the donors or the persons who asked to paint the picture at the bottom of the painting. The main part of the painting is religious but the portraits are secular. In later *paubhas*, the figures of the donors become larger and take equal space in the painting. Gradually, the portrait became bigger than the religious figure at the end of the Malla period. From the beginning of the Shaha period, portraits existed independently. During the Rana rule, the art of portrait painting reaches the climax since the Ranas loved the image of themselves and their family members. The artworks exist independently without reference to myths and religious texts. There is the transition from religious contents to secular subject matters. This article traces the development of secular elements in Nepali paintings. It compares the paintings in terms of the inclusion of secular elements.

Keywords: religious - secular - manuscript illumination-*paubha* - portrait - landscape

INTRODUCTION

The earliest Nepali paintings are found in the eleventh century *Prajnaparamita* manuscript. They represent the contents of the Buddhist myths and religious texts. Religious paintings are found in the form

of manuscript illumination and *paubha* (Uprety 1992). These visual compositions represent the Buddhist and Hindu deities and their various activities as narrated in the mythologies. The artists of these paintings were influenced by religious iconography. These artworks are magical and mystical. Ray (1967) argues about these religious works: “Without considering religion and philosophy as a foundation, no genuine evaluation can be made of the basic character of Nepali Art. The symbols of art here voice the same truth as philosophy and myth” (pp.10-11). These visual arts are worshipped as images and icons of divinity. In this context, Brown (1912) articulates:

Nepalese artist either elevates the observer by the transcendental nature of his celestial conceptions, or terrorizes him into docility by his suggestions of purgatory. It is an art, therefore, as far as the people themselves are concerned, which inspires awe and veneration more than pleasure and is worshipped rather than admired. (p.130)

The patrons or the devotees worshipped the icon of the divinity present in the paintings and prayed in front of the visual figure of the deity (Rana 2021). Serpentine and flexible figures and luminosity of texture make the image lively and youthful.

Prajnaparamita manuscript illuminations (dated 1054) depict different scenes from Buddha’s life including his nativity, goddess Prajnaparamita, *panchabuddhas* and various bodhisattvas (Sharma 2020). Pictures from Buddha’s life include Buddha’s nativity, devil’s temptation and attack, meditation under the *bodhi* tree, the miracle of the snake, offering honey to Buddha by a monkey, visiting mother after his enlightenment, taming mad elephant and *mahaparinirvana*. These images narrate the magical events of the Buddha’s life (Rana 2019).

On the cover of *Visnudharma* manuscript of the eleventh century, ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu have been portrayed. The paintings of these ten incarnations are didactic. Whenever the demons terrorize the earth and heaven, lord Vishnu in the form of various incarnations subdues and destroys them rescuing religious men, women and deities. The incarnations like *Matsya* (fish), avatar, *Kurma* (tortoise) avatar, *Varaha* (boar), avatar, *Narasimha* (half-man, half-lion) avatar have magical and supernatural features (Sharma 2020).

The *paubha* is painted on a piece of cloth, and worshipped as a religious icon since it has sacred and ceremonial subject matter. Some

paubha paintings present the erotic union of god and goddess. In the *paubha* painting, the principal deity or deities reside at the center, and secondary deities, other images and symbols are around the central figure. These images are depicted with symmetry, balance and visual order (Chitrakar 2019).

The *paubha* painting of *Nritesvara*, dated 1659, presents the figure Lord Shiva in erotic union with his Shakti, and the couple is in rhythmic dance (Chitrakar 2021). Other many images reinforce the central motif of the union (Pal 1985). The head of Shiva is in the shape of *Shivalinga*, and the top of the shrine is represented by the erect phallus. The lotus and the *vajra* in the hands of deities also symbolize the union, for *vajra* symbolizes male principle and lotus female (Sharma 2009). Some *paubha* paintings incorporate the portraits of the donors along the bottom of the paintings (Upreti 1992). These are the worldly elements in religious paintings.

Breaking away from mystical and magical religious paintings, from the eighteenth century with the rise of Shaha Kings, the artists executed the subject matters of worldly objects and events independently (Sharma 2014). Portraits emphasized the fine representations of real people. The portraits of the kings, their family members and other higher officials appeared independently without much religious imagery. The portrait of king Girvanyuddhavikram Shaha dated 1815 is an example of early secular painting.

Western media and realistic style heavily influenced the techniques of portrait painting during the Rana regime from the mid-nineteenth century (Sharma 2018). Rana Prime ministers, Jung Bahadur Rana and Chandra Sumshere traveled Europe, got their portraits executed in western techniques and brought some western artworks home (Singh 1976). Since the artists and the rulers were exposed to western forms of paintings and fascinated by them, these aristocrats asked these artists to make portraits of themselves and their relatives in western realistic techniques (Mishra, 2045). Breaking away from religious painting, realistic techniques and western art media entered the domain of Nepali painting during the Rana autocracy (Subedi 2021). Many Nepali artists painted the pictures without direct reference to myths and religious subject matters (Sharma 2019). The paintings included portraits, landscapes and still-life, and pictures of hunting of wild animals (Sharma 2009). The available literatures discuss about religious visual compositions and the works related to worldly

objects, characters and events but do not trace the development of secular paintings. This study attempts to fill this gap by exploring why secular elements have been integrated in religious paintings, how they have taken larger space and how Nepali paintings have been created without reference to myths and religious texts.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The research area of this study is Nepali painting. The study attempts to trace the process of transition from religious paintings to secular ones. It is the comparative study of religious and secular contents in the paintings. The exploration shows a series of changes in the domain of Nepali art from the early period to the recent past. The paintings are primary sources for analysis, interpretation and discussion to support the thesis statement. The books on the history of Nepali art, journals and magazines are the secondary sources for literature review and reference materials to create the background of the study, identify the research gap and show a point of departure. Art galleries and museums were visited to view the artworks.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Early Nepali paintings are religious whereas the paintings of the recent past are secular. There is a gradual shift from religious contents to secular subject matters, and ultimately, paintings exist independently without reference to myths and religious texts. In the fifteenth-century *Sivadharma* manuscript, *Shivalinga* is painted which assimilates both erotic and spiritual concepts. Shivalinga is a religious icon whereas their association with erotic images is considered secular. Aran (1978) states:

Shiva cult in Nepal comes in the form of *Lingam* (Phallus), which was the early form of *Shiva* Icon. The *Lingam* is roughly cylindrical in shape, standing upright on its narrow end and rounded at the top. It usually stands on a flat-rimmed disc called *yoni* being possibly the female symbol. (p.78)

The erotic and sacred themes have been assimilated in the Hindu religious arts both in terms of physical union and creation. According to Pal (1978), secular and worldly elements are present despite the dominance of religious contents in the paintings.

Hitopadesha manuscript illuminations dated 1594 deal with secular themes. This manuscript represents two animal fables in visual form. These paintings are didactic (Sharma 2014). One fable is about an old vulture, birds and a cat. The old and blind vulture works as a babysitter for the other

birds. For its labor, it is offered food by the birds. One day a cat comes there and befriends the blind vulture by flattering it. Then the cat climbs the tree, eats all the chicks and goes away leaving their bones. When the parent birds return, they become angry thinking that the vulture devoured their chicks, and thus kill the old vulture. The fable gives the moral that one should not believe in flattery. The other fable is about a jackal and a deer. The jackal becomes a friend of a deer, and takes the deer to a greenfield to graze, where the farmers have set a trap. The deer is caught in the trap. The jackal hopes to eat the trapped animal. But the Jackal fails, for the farmers release the deer from the trap. According to Bangdel (1977), the treatment of colors in this secular painting is sober, delicate and harmonious.

The nineteenth-century *paubha*, *Usnisavijaya*, represents religious images and cultural rites simultaneously. Stupa, the religious image has been created at the center, and on the surface of the stupa, images of the goddess Usnisavijaya, the religious contents, have been painted. Below the stupa, there is the painting of *Bhimaratha* rite, the secular subject matter, which is observed by a person on reaching the age of seventy-seven years, seven months and seven days (Sharma 2009). The old person is seated on the chariot drawn by the horse, and other many human figures standing on both sides of the chariot are observing the ceremony. This part of the painting related to the cultural rite, co-exists with religious images like a stupa, and the image of the goddess (Vajracharya 1978). Below the scene of *Bhimaratha* rite along the bottom, donors or devotees are worshipping and praying the deity (Pal 1978). The human figures of the *Bhimarath* scene, donors and the devotees, the secular contents, are painted in Mughal-Rajput style.

Some *paubhas* attempt to resolve the duality between sacred and profane, religious and secular aspects. *Nritesvara Paubha*, dated 1659, depicts the sexual union of Shiva and his Shakti, and their rhythmic cosmic dance (Sharma 2009). Shiva, in white complexion is embarrassing his Shakti in red complexion with his arms. The rhythmic movement is suggested by their lifted legs. Generally, sexual connotations related to Shiva are depicted through the use of abstract symbol like *Shivalinga*, but in this painting, Shiva and Shakti are represented in direct sexual union. The images in the painting are the “tantric manifestations of Shiva and Parvati” (Subedi 1992). This painting represents the principal dimension of *tantric* philosophy.

Tantra believes that by exploiting the worldly pleasure perceived by sense organs and channeling them properly, enlightenment can also be achieved. Among the various pleasures of this world, “sex as a powerful motivating factor, which, like other passions and desires can be used rather than suppressed” (Aran 1978). In the *tantra*, women are considered a goddess and the worship of the deity is associated with the fertility cult. The goddess is the “creative principle” or the “cosmic Shakti” who is regarded as the central figure of the cult, and the union of the male with the female is associated with the union of the individual self with the cosmic being (Aran 1978). The *tantrics* seem to accept the assumption that sexual energy is identical to creative energy.

In *Vajrayana* Buddhism, *vajra* is the “emblem held by Buddhist divinities” (Shakya 2000). *Vajra* is structurally “centered on a vase-like midsection, endowed with eight-petalled lotuses” which symbolizes the union of male and female principles, and the absolute bliss (25). Waldschmidt & Leonore (1967) assert:

Various names take on at one and the same time a religious and an erotic meaning. For instance, the phallus is called Vajra, ‘Thunderbolt’ or Mani, ‘Jewel’, and the female organ in Padma, i.e. lotus. In this sense, Vajrayana can become a way to salvation by means of the sacred enjoyment of love . . . Nirvana became equated with the orgasm (p.35).

The observation of the *paubha* paintings depicting the union of gods and goddesses inspires the viewer to envision the absolute bliss of sexual union, and finally his/her union with *Brahman*. Khadka (1995) elaborates:

[T]he devotee identifies the semen with Shiva and the menstrual flow with Shakti-- the dual sources of creation. By sexually uniting these two, the yogi symbolically achieves the union of Shiva/Shakti within himself or herself. The mingling of these two in sexual union, or even mere envisioning it, suffices to give vivid experience of the cosmic union of Shiva/Shakti. (p.67)

The union of Shiva and Shakti or the male and female principles is associated with the union of individual *sadhaka* with cosmic being. *Nritesvara Paubha* also depicts the working of *tantric* philosophy (Sharma 2009). Shiva is in union with Shakti, and they are dancing in cosmic rhythm. There are numerous cohesive images to reinforce the central motif of the union. The apex of the Shiva’s shrine resembles the Shivalinga and erect phallus. The symbols like lotus and the *vajra* in the hands of the deities imply

the union of *prakriti* and *purusha*. The overall organization contributes to the union of Shiva and Shakti and their cosmic dance in rhythm. The *paubha* of *Nritesvara* symbolically attempts to resolve the duality of sacred and profane. Ray (1967) states: “Worldliness and spirituality are complementary not antagonistic in Nepali thought. In the same way, perhaps life and art, the religious and secular are not separate entities in the painting.”

The Buddhist *paubha*, *Samvara and Vajravarahi in Union*, dated 1450, also attempts to resolve the dualities of sacred and profane. Buddhist god Samvara in blue complexion is in union with his *prajna*, Varahi in red at the center of the composition. Except for the ornaments, both of them are naked. Vajravarahi’s legs encircle Samvara’s waist in a passionate embrace while his two hands encircle her waist (Sharma 2009). This symbolic painting depicts the harmony between sacred and profane images.

In some paintings, gods and goddesses are “created in the image” of human having both “benign and malevolent” nature “just as each human being is capable of both kindness and anger” (Pal 1978). The “youthful figures” of gods and goddesses always present the “vibrant sap of life” (Ray 1967). Sometimes, the divine characters behave like ordinary human beings. These features are secular features.

From the seventeenth century, secular contents of Mughal arts began to influence Nepali paintings. The arrival of refugee artists in Nepal from India after Muslim invasions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries also facilitated the entry of Indian influence in Nepali paintings (Sharma 2009). The subject matters of painting were “portraiture and brilliant court ceremonials like shooting, hawking parties, battles or sieges” (Havell, 1980). Rajput paintings, the aristocratic lyrical folk arts, generally deal with love. They are vivid with life and poignant charm. Such features of Rajput paintings appear in the portraits of the donor in the paintings of later periods as depicted toward the bottom of some compositions. In the eighteenth and nineteenth-century compositions, the portraits of the donor take larger space, and gradually portraits were executed independently in Mughal-Rajput manner. The images of divinity are religious contents whereas the figures of donors are secular. On the walls of Kumarighara, there is a beautiful portrait of King Jayaprakash Malla. This painting also suggests the growing popularity of portrait painting in Nepal. Human beings were not satisfied with their dedication to the divine and asserted their existence in the artworks. These paintings contributed to the integration of secular subject matters in Nepali arts.

Ray (1967) further states that in the paintings, “men are always handsome heroes, the women are eternally sixteen, the symbols of seductive beauty” (p.14). They elevate everything to a “sphere of happiness” and youth since youth is the “visual face of fertility” and “women are the main instruments of procreation, the women in their youthful countenance” are represented in visual art as the “figures of abundance”(Ray 1967). The goddesses are “charmingly youthful and endowed with fresh blossoming breasts” (Pal 1978). The elements like human nature, youth, beauty and reproduction are also closer to secular aspects.

Breaking away from mystical and religious paintings, portrait and landscape paintings developed independently. The portraits of the devotees and donors were painted along the bottom of many traditional paintings of later phases. The portraits of the kings, aristocrats and higher officials also exist independently. In these artworks, realism replaces mythological aspects of traditional paintings. King Girvanyuddha Vikram Shah’s portrait, dated 1815, for instance, presents the secular aspects. “Such realistic portraits of royalty became fashionable in Nepal” because of the “Mughal and Rajput influence” (Pal 1978). Such portraits suggest the entry and growth of realistic secular paintings in nineteenth-century Nepal.

During the Rana regime later nineteenth century onward, western secular paintings and realistic techniques heavily influenced the Nepali portrait painting, and it flourished and reached the climax. Jung Bahadur Rana, the first Prime Minister of the Rana regime, visited Europe in 1850. He got exposed to western paintings and was fascinated by them. In Europe, he got his portraits made in the western realistic style and brought them to Nepal (Singh 1976). The paintings of Victoria and Albert were sent to Nepal from England at Jung Bahadur’s request and now they are in National Museum, Chhauni. Nepali court artist, Bhajuman Chitrakar, accompanied Jung Bahadur in his journey to Europe. Bhajuman also got exposure to new forms of art in Europe. After returning Nepal, Bhajuman executed portraits of Jung Bahadur and his family members in the western style. Subedi (1992) states that Bhajuman’s visit to Europe is a significant event in Nepali portrait making since he used western realistic techniques of paintings (p.121). Next Rana Prime Minister, Chandra Sumshere, took another Nepali artist Dirghaman Chitrakar on his journey to Europe in 1908. More western influences in art came to Nepal with Dirghaman’s visit to Europe (Sharma 2018). The Ranas employed artists to do the portraits of the royalties since no other forms of art were encouraged. The portrait of

Mathabar Singh Thapa dated 1986 B.S. by Dirghaman Chitrakar shows the influence of western mediums like the use of oil color and western realistic style.

Foreign artists were invited to Nepal to execute the portraits and the scenes of hunting wild animals in the forest. The realistic portrait of Jung Bahadur Rana, dated 1938, which is in Kaiser library now, was painted by A. E. Harris. There are also the huge oil paintings entitled *Tiger Hunting* dated 1928 and *Rhino Hunting* dated 1930 by F. T. Daws. These representational and realistic paintings, executed in western media and style, display the cruelty of the Rana rulers (Sharma 2014). The works of such foreign artists also helped to bring secular elements to Nepali paintings. Nepali artists and rulers' visits to Europe, importing of western art in Nepal, and inviting the western artists in Nepal are the elements that brought western realistic techniques and secular contents to Nepal. The paintings executed during the Rana regime like portraits, landscapes, still-life paintings and the paintings of hunting scenes break away from the magical and religious paintings like manuscript illuminations and *paubhas* in the sense that they are secular in terms of theme, realistic in terms of representation and western in terms of techniques and media. At this point, secular paintings came into the mainstream of Nepali art.

CONCLUSION

Manuscript illuminations, *paubhas* and wall paintings, the early Nepali painting are religious, magical and mystical, for they present the characters and myths from Hindu and Buddhist myths and religious texts. Despite the dominance of religious contents, some of these religious paintings have integrated secular aspects. The paintings related to the erotic union of gods and their consorts attempt to resolve the duality between sacred and profane aspects. This suggests that worldliness and spirituality are complementary in Nepali thought. Similarly, the religious and secular themes are not separate entities. Some didactic visual narratives analogically teach moral lessons to the viewers without religious reference. Gradually, some *paubha* paintings of the later period incorporate the portraits of the donors at the bottom of the compositions and landscapes having mountains and trees in the background. These portraits and the landscapes play only a subsidiary role in the overall organization of the painting but they are important in the sense that they mark the beginning of integrating secular elements in religious paintings. Toward the end of the Malla period, some

paintings have given equal space to divine figures and human activities including portraits. In a few artworks, a huge portrait of the ruler occupies the space whereas the figure of the deity is small. Increased secular contents in paintings suggest that secular aspects in society have been given more importance than religious ones. During the Rana rule, secular paintings like portraits, landscapes and still life paintings exist independently without reference to myths and religious texts.

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