

# Magical and Mystical Aspects in Nepali Manuscript Illuminations

*Yam Prasad Sharma*

## Abstract

*Nepali Manuscript illuminations are traditional miniature paintings found in religious manuscripts, including Prajnaparamita, Pancaraksa, Shivadharm, Visnudharma, and Devimahatmya. The religious manuscripts narrate mythical events in verbal texts and illustrate mythical characters and their actions simultaneously. The forms, figures and activities of the characters are symbolic, magical and mystical. The paintings present divine and supernatural characters in their spectacular feats of real life. The artworks represent the characters and events of Hindu and Buddhist myths. Despite the presence of magical and mystical elements, the visual narratives teach moral lessons to the real people of the real world. The symbols signify something else beyond the represented visuals. The miniature paintings motivate the readers and viewers for reading and learning by telling interesting stories. Presentation of strange and unusual characters and events renews viewers' perception providing delight while suggesting ethical values of the society. The presentation through magical and mystical characters and actions conveys moral lessons in aesthetic manner. This article traces the magical and mystical features of Nepali manuscript illuminations and attempts to throw light on their significance.*

**Keywords:** Manuscript illuminations, symbolic characters, myth, religious harmony

## Introduction

Paintings have been a part of our culture ever since humans initiated celebrating festivals and ceremonies in their primitive communities. But the earliest Nepali painting ever found is in the *Prajnaparamita* manuscript dated 1015 A. D. (Pal 1978, p.12). Manuscripts are handwritten religious texts which the artists, writers or priests copied and illustrated with drawings and paintings related to the myths in the texts. They wrote manuscripts on palm leaves. Later, the paper took place of palm leaves after the thirteenth century. Pictures are at the center of the page, and the verbal texts are on both of sides of the visual composition. There are decorative patterns and floral designs along the borders (Pal 1978, p.65). In some manuscripts, the text is at the center and the pictures are at the sides of the page. Few manuscripts present paintings on one page and text on the next. Miniature pictures are also found on the covers of the manuscripts. The paintings appear in both Buddhist and Hindu manuscripts.

*Prajnaparamita, Pancaraksa, Dharanisamgraha* and *Gandavyuha* are Buddhist manuscripts that have been illustrated with miniature paintings. Buddhist manuscripts narrate the life of Buddha and present the portraits of *Bodhisattva*. Hindu manuscript illuminations are in *Visnudharma, Bhagavata Mahapurana, Shivadharm, the Ramayana* and *Devimahatmya* manuscripts. These manuscripts represent Hindu gods and goddesses like Shiva, Vishnu, Durga and associated narratives from the myths (Dwivedi 1982, p.30).

These compositions are magical in the sense that there are supernatural characters, and some strange events take place in the picture that we cannot see in real life (Pal 1975, p.49). For example, Lord Vishnu takes the incarnation of fish. Here the fish is the god. These works are symbolic, that is, in the composition, we can see a figure that signifies something else beyond the visible image ((Kramrisch 1964, p.46). In some cases, the significances are not presented overtly. Such images are the symbols. For example, the fish symbolizes Lord Vishnu. The painting presents the picture of fish, but the figure of the god is not there. We must guess the significance of the symbols.

The compositions in the manuscript are didactic, that is, they teach moral lessons to the viewers (Pal 1985, p.50). The artworks, for instance, explore the theme of sin and punishment. Viewing these works, we learn the lesson that we should not commit sin; we try to correct ourselves. Some of the paintings are anthropomorphic, that is, the nonliving things or animals appear, act or behave like human beings. The tortoise, for instance, behaves like a human being at the time of churning the ocean for nectar in *Visnudharma* manuscript painting.

## **Research Methodology**

The research area is Nepali manuscript illumination that has been explored emphasizing magical and mystical aspects and their significance in the artworks. This research is qualitative, for it analyzes and interprets the artworks to support the thesis statement of the study. Since the study derives the thesis statement based on available evidences and examples, it uses an inductive method for supporting the argument. The same artwork may have multiple interpretations. The researcher has used secondary sources like books and articles to create the background of the study. The manuscripts paintings are the primary sources under scrutiny in this research.

## **Analysis and Interpretation of Manuscript Paintings**

Nepali religious manuscript illuminations are magical, didactic and anthropomorphic. The paintings impart ethical values through the visual narration of mythical texts. The copresence of Buddhist and Hindu characters, figures and images in the compositions presents the religious harmony between these two different faiths. This section of the

paper attempts to trace these contents in the visual compositions and tries to throw light on their significances. *Visnudharma* manuscript paintings dated 1047 present Lord Visnu's ten incarnations. According to Hindu myths, the deity takes incarnation to save innocent individuals and minor gods to restore order in the universe destroying evils and demonic nature. The concept of taking incarnation itself is magical and mystical. It is difficult to see and experience. This demands faith and imagination for acceptance. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the magical features in the metaphors and analogies reveals the pragmatic values of the artworks. The visual compositions of the ten incarnations present the moral lesson about the consequences of the sin. The artworks make viewers aware of these ideas.

The fish represents the incarnation of Lord Vishnu as a fish that protects the world from floods and drowning. The fish is the personification of the god. Because of this picture and myth, people worship the fish as the lord Vishnu and an auspicious symbol in ritual. The respect for the fish represents respect for life, water and nature. The tortoise is the second incarnation of the god that saves the mountain from drowning while gods and devils are churning the ocean for nectar. The anthropomorphic behavior of the tortoise is magical. The tortoise understands the critical situation and acts on time. The incarnation of the god in the form of boar saves the earth which has been drowned in the sea due to the excessive sins of demons. The powerful and heroic posture of the boar takes out the earth in the image of a female deity. These compositions have anthropomorphic features in the sense that the artist personifies the figures of earth, fish, tortoise and boar giving human characters. The boar acts like the divine figure. The earth or the land appears in female human form. In this sense, characters and events are mystical and magical (Sharma 2014, p.37). This also suggests that divinity may appear in any form for the protection of moral and spiritual values.

The incarnation in the form of half lion and half man (*Narasingh*) destroys Hiranyakasyapu, the demon king, to protect Prahlada, his devotee. Hiranyakasyapu has the boon that neither man nor animal can kill him. The demon tortures his own son for believing in the god. Hiranyakasyapu thinks himself as the most powerful person in the universe. So, the god takes the incarnation in the form of a lion and man in the same body and destroys the demon. The existence of the hybrid body of man and animal is mystical and unusual. The incarnation in the form of a dwarf (*Baman*) ended the pride of Bali, the demon king. The god disguises himself in the form of a Brahmin and requests the king for the land that he can take in three steps so that he can meditate sitting there. Bali agrees to provide the land. Then, Vishnu stretches his leg up and covers the entire heaven in the first stride. In the second stride, he takes the Earth. There is no place for the third stride. So, the king offers his own head. Then, Vishnu lands his foot on the head of the proud and generous king forcing him down to the pandemonium. This picture is also mystical and magical.

Incarnation in the form of Parasurama kills all the corrupt *Kshatriyas*, the warriors, of the earth with his axe. Rama, the protagonist of the epic *Ramayana*, Laxman, his brother, and the monkeys kill Ravana, the king of Lanka. The incarnation in the form Krishna destroys Kansa, the demon King, and Kauravas, the sinful rulers. The epic *Mahabharata* narrates this story in detail.

The painting also includes Buddha as the incarnation of Visnu. The presentation of Buddha and Hindu gods in the visual composition suggests the existence of religious tolerance in the then Nepali society. Hinduism integrates new and useful ideas and thoughts into its own philosophical system. *Kalki Avatar*, the last incarnation in a human form with a sword is on the horseback. People believe that the god will come in the future to protect the innocents of being destroyed by the evils. The compositions are the visual narrations of ten incarnations based on mythology that teach moral lessons to ordinary people. The symbols signify beyond themselves. The non-humans act like humans and divinities. This is the mystical and magical feature of the paintings.

Some compositions in *Visnudharma* manuscripts present the figure of Visnu with four hands holding a conch shell, wheel, mace and lotus. The god is moving up in the air on his vehicle *Garuda* (large bird). The god is anthropomorphic but the presence of four hands and the bird as a vehicle makes the painting magical. Few works present Vishnu with Laxmi, his Shakti or the female principle.

The *Ramayan* manuscript illuminations (15<sup>th</sup> century) present the portraits of Rama, the protagonist of the epic poem, Sita, his wife, Laxman, his brother, and his devotees and Hanumana (monkey), his friend and devotee (Sharma 2014, p.39). The devotion of the monkey toward Rama is a magical feature of the composition.

*Devimahatmya* manuscript illuminations (14<sup>th</sup> century) present different forms of goddess Durga destroying the demon in the form of buffalo and his army. Durga disguises herself in the form of a beautiful girl to lure the demon. The demon comes with a marriage proposal, meanwhile, goddess Durga from the lion's back (her vehicle) with different weapons in her multiple hands attacks the buffalo demon and his companions, and gets victory destroying them. The artwork presents the magical power of the goddess Durga.



Fig.1 Covers of *Shivadharma* Manuscript Illumination, 1450

The thirteenth-century *Shivadharma* manuscript paintings present Lord Shiva with his consort Parvati at the center of the composition. Parvati is sitting on the lap of Lord Shiva. Trident, the weapon of the god, symbolizes three duties of the god creation of the universe, preservation and nourishment of living beings, and destruction of devils and sins (Shakya 2000, p. 31). The Ganga river, in female form, pours water over the vast hair of the Shiva. The position of the river on the head is a mystical feature. The river looks like a human being. *Sivadharma* manuscript paintings dated 1450 depict *Shivalinga*, (Fig.1) the union of the *Lingum* (Phallus) and *Yoni* (vagina), Shiva and Parvati, Uma and Mahesvara, the male and the female principles, the source of all creations.

*Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita* Manuscript paintings dated 1054 A.D. present goddess Prajnaparamita, pictures from the Buddha's life, *Bodhisattvas* and *Panchabuddhas* (five transcendental Buddhas) from the Buddhist myths. The painting presents Buddha's birth. Siddhartha Buddha comes down from Maya Devi's hip, walks seven steps and stands on the lotus flower, the symbol of nirvana (Fig.2). The seven steps of the young god immediately after the birth is a mystical feature that suggests the divine qualities in the figure. Hindu deity Brahma with rice grain welcomes the new god. Similarly, Indra is present there with a fish in his hand. Rice grain and fish are auspicious signs. The respect of the Hindu gods toward Buddha suggests the religious harmony in the then-contemporary society.



Fig.2 Covers of *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita Manuscript*, 1054

The twelfth-century *Prajnaparamita* manuscript illustrations present goddess *Prajnaparamita* with other six deities. *Prajnaparamita* with four hands is on the lotus flower. Her two hands make *Dharmachakra mudra*. This *mudra* is the gesture of turning the wheel of law in Buddhist mythology. Her upper right hand has a string of beads She holds a manuscript in her upper left hand. The manuscript is the symbol of wisdom. The presentation of four hands of the divine figure is the magical aspect of the goddess. This suggests her power.

The conch shell, vase, flower, and lamp in the painting are cohesive to the theme of wisdom. The vase full of water is an auspicious sign that symbolizes abundance (Aran 1978, p. 230). The lamp is the symbol of enlightenment. The concept of moksha and enlightenment is also a mystical aspect. The conch shell symbolizes Buddha's speech and teaching (Shakya 2000, p. 29). One deity holds a sword which "cuts through the darkness of the ignorance" (Shakya 2000, p. 25). The representation of four hands of the deity *Prajnaparamita* and the symbolic significances of the images are magical, for we cannot see such visuals in real life.

Other paintings in the same *Prajnaparamita* manuscript represent *Bodhisattvas* around the meditative figure of Buddha. *Bodhisattva* is a concept of *Mahayana* Buddhism. *Mahayana* means 'the great vehicle' to achieve nirvana. *Mahayana* Buddhism exists in sharp contrast to *Hinayana*, the small vehicle. *Hinayana* is called *Theravada*, the teaching of elders.

*Hinayana*, states that Buddha is not a god but a great teacher. His success to enlightenment is great, and it is possible for other human beings as well if they put the effort in the right manner like the Buddha (Aran 1978, p. 47). According to *Mahayana* Buddhism, nirvana is possible for individuals "not only by their own endeavor but also through the vicarious suffering of a new deity, the *Bodhisattva*, an intermediary between the passive Buddha and

the suffering humans” (Aran 1978, p. 49). Ernst and Rose Leonore Waldschmidt (1967) state about *Bodhisattavas*:

Enthroned beside the Dhyani Buddhas in their worlds are so-called *Bodhisattvas*, ‘Being of Enlightenment’, who are potential Buddhas or Buddhas designate. These blessed beings have come within reach of their goal, the rank of a Buddha, having traveled the way that leads through the ten stages (*bhumi*) of supreme virtue and perfection; they have, however, abstained from taking the final step to deliverance and extinction in order to stand by those who have remained behind on earth, their former companions in suffering, to help them in their troubles and guide to them along the right path. These *Bodhisattvas* thus have the function of helpers to those who belong to this branch of the Buddhist religion-like the saints in the western churches. (p.29)

In Mahayana Buddhism, *Bodhisattvas* remain between ordinary human beings and the state of Nirvana. They have the ability to rise to Nirvana but willingly do not rise so that they can help and lead their fellow beings to Nirvana. This view conveys the concept that helping others is more important than one’s achievement of greater status. *Bodhisattvas* are the enlightened ones and the bridge between the Buddha and the ordinary persons who try to achieve *Nirvana*. They have the potential to discard the mundane world and achieve the divine state but they deliberately choose not to take the final step toward nirvana for helping their suffering friends in this world.

The twelfth-century *Prajnaparamita* manuscript paintings present the figure of Buddha in *Dharmachakra Mudra* (the gesture of teaching the law). Ratnapani, Samantabhadra, Manjusri, Vajrapani, Avalokitesvara and Visvapani, the *Bodhisattvas*, seated in *Dharmachakra Mudra*, hold a lotus. People believe that *Bodhisattvas* spread Buddha’s teachings to common folks. They work as mediators between Buddha and ordinary people. This work shares the idea of *Mahayana* Buddhism.

The twelfth-century *Vessantara Jataka* manuscript paintings teach moral lessons about kindness, generosity and religious harmony through a visual narration of a Buddhist story. Vessantara, a kind prince, gives the white elephant to another kingdom nearby that has suffered from drought. There is a belief that the white elephant brings rain. This is the magical aspect of the painting. When he has given the elephant, his own nation suffers later due to the lack of rain. The prince considers other country’s problem more important. The monarch forces the prince to exile due to the demand of the people.

Vessantara took refuge in jungle taking his wife, son and daughter. While Vessantara is meditating in the forest, Lord Indra, the king of heaven, comes in the disguise of a *Brahmin* and begs for the son and daughter to take away with him. The change of appearance, form and figure of the god is also a mystical feature. The prince happily provides his kids to the

*Brahmin*. He renounces the bond of attachment for his family members. The *Brahmin* takes the children and drives them ahead using his stick and scolds them. Actually, Indra has taken a test of the prince's kindness and generosity. The prince has passed the test taken by the deity. Finally, the god throws his disguise and reveals the secret of the test. Then, all the family members go for the reunion in the king's palace. The visual narrative emphasizes the significance of kindness and sacrifice. This is the Buddhist manuscript but integrates the figure Indra, the Hindu deity, implying religious tolerance between Buddhism and Hinduism in the then-contemporary Nepali society.



Fig.3 *Pancaraksa* Manuscript Illumination, 1250

*Pancaraksa* manuscript illuminations dated 1250 present mystical characters and narrate magical events (Fig.3). These compositions depict five goddesses, the symbols of five charms, used to protect devotees from diseases, disasters and other problems like snakebite and smallpox. The artist animates and personifies the concept of protective charms like human figures and divine characters. One of the paintings presents Buddha and Mahapratishara, the goddess, with whom devotees consult about their sickness. The animated figure of sickness runs away when the religious manuscript of *Pancaraksa* opens. The painting presents the magical power of the manuscript. The figure of the disease behaves like a human being. In this sense, the picture is mystical. This visual narrative tells the story of deities and disease. The shining yellow, indigo, red and green colors make the composition vivacious and lively. The borders present the decorative pattern with geometric shapes floral designs (Sharma 2010, p.59). The ideas in *Pancaraksa* are still in practice in contemporary Nepali society in the sense that religious people keep religious books like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, *Chandi*, *Devi Bhagavata* and *Vedas*, and worship them so that the religious scriptures will protect them from diseases, demons and other problems.

*Gandavyuha* manuscript illuminations (12<sup>th</sup> century) present the spiritual transformation of Sudhana, his dialogue with the *Bodhisattva* Manjushri, and the achievement of nirvana. The halo at the back of Manjushri symbolizes his spiritual power and divine status.



The pictures in these Buddhist manuscripts have flowing lines and curves suggesting visual melody. The figures are flexible and sinuous with luminous texture. This makes the characters youthful and lively. Rajatananda Das Gupta (1968) points out the stylistic aspects of these magical compositions in the manuscripts:

The lines move in continuous flowing curves and successfully model the masses and volumes within the given contour. Human figures are full, sinuous and rounded while draughtsman-ship attains the height in the decorative motifs. Some landscape is also attempted by arranging stylized trees at uniform distances. (p.10)

Flowing curves and sinuous figures provide a sense of rhythm in the visuals. The decorative motifs embellish the artworks. Amita Ray (1973) states that the lines in these paintings are “rounded and sweeping and color has almost a modeling effect” (p.49). Buddhist manuscript paintings depict the influence of Ajanta wall painting (5<sup>th</sup> century) and manuscript paintings of the period of the Pala dynasty (5<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> century) in India. These murals in Ajanta caves present the birth of Buddha and other events of his life until Mahapari-nirvana, the great departure (Aran 1978, p.127). These influences came through visiting merchants, monks and pilgrims. The magical and mystical characters and mythical events suggest the unlimited power of the divinities.

## Conclusion

Nepali paintings in religious manuscripts present ethical values using mystical characters, narrating magical events and integrating symbolic figures. The images suggest something else beyond themselves. The supernatural characters seem to be performing in a magical manner. The nonhuman characters act and behave like human beings. The artists animated and personified animals. The visual narratives attempt to teach moral lessons to the readers and viewers. The characters and events refer to myths. The artworks also depict the religious tolerance between Buddhism and Hinduism in ancient Nepali society. The manuscripts with visual and verbal texts not only teach valuable lessons to the readers but also provide aesthetic pleasure presenting strange characters and events.

## References

- Aran, L. (1978). *The art of Nepal: A guide to the masterpieces of sculptures, painting and woodcarving*. Kathmandu: Sahayogi.
- Dwivedi, P. K. (1982). *Miniature paintings of national museum Kathmandu*. Kathmandu: National Museum.
- Gupta, R. D. (1968). *Nepalese miniatures*. Baranasi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan.
- Kramrisch, S. (1964). *The art of Nepal*. New York: Asia House Gallery.

- Pal, P. (1975). *Nepal: Where the Gods are young*. New York: Asia House Gallery.
- Pal, P. (1978). *The arts of Nepal part II*. Leiden: Tuta Sub Aegide Allas.
- Pal, P. (1985). *Arts of Nepal: A catalog of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Collection*. Berkeley: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Wilshire Boulevard and California UP.
- Ray, A. (1973). *Arts of Nepal*. New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations.
- Shakya, M. B. (2000). *Sacred art of Nepal: Nepalese paubha painting, past and present*. Kathmandu: Handicraft Association of Nepal.
- Sharma, Y.P. (2010). *Contemporary Nepal Painting: Hybridity and Negotiation*. Diss. TU.
- Sharma, Y.P. (2014). *Nepali painting: A Critical analysis*. Kathmandu: Nepal Academy of Fine Arts.
- Waldschmidt, E. & R. Leonore. (1967). *Nepal: Art treasures from the Himalayas*. Calcutta: Oxford & IBH Publishing Co.