

DIDACTIC VISUAL NARRATIONS IN NEPALI MANUSCRIPT ILLUMINATIONS

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Abstract

Manuscript illuminations are the early forms of traditional Nepali paintings. Manuscript illuminations are the miniature paintings found in the manuscripts, the handwritten religious texts and treaties on ethics. Such paintings tell the mythical stories in visual form. Some manuscript illuminations present the characters and events in such a way that they tell moral stories using visual medium. Sometimes, the contents appear in the form of fable. The animals are personified, for they act and behave like a human being. In some cases, the visual narration is allegorical in the sense that one set of characters, setting and events stand for other characters, place and activities. Although some characters are animals and supernatural beings, they reflect on this world, human beings and objects in the world. Such paintings explore real world, human experiences and moral values through strange, unusual and de-autometized art forms. The paintings attempt to create moral order in the then contemporary society. This article traces such issues and themes in narrative paintings found in manuscripts like Vishnudharma, Shivadharm, Devimahatmya, Pancaraksa, VesantaraJataka and Hitopadesa.

Manuscript illuminations, the early forms of Nepali paintings, are based on mythical texts and religious themes. The paintings explore the issues related to both Hinduism and Buddhism. Some paintings integrate both Hindu and Buddhist divinities, icons and symbols in a single work of art suggesting religious harmony. The paintings in manuscripts not only illustrate the verbal texts but also embellish manuscripts by making aesthetically appealing. The didactic verbal narration becomes more comprehensible because of visual images, figures, symbols and events. The paintings have aesthetic, functional and moral aspects. Vishnudharma, Shivadharm and

Devimahatmya are some of the Hindu manuscripts that have been beautifully illustrated. These manuscript illuminations represent the figures and icons of Hindu deities like Vishnu, Shiva and Durga and related symbols along with narrative scenes depicting their various supernatural activities. In the eleventh century Vishnudharma manuscript, we can see the images of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. These narrative paintings of ten incarnations are didactic in the sense that they visually teach the moral lessons that the divine beings destroy the demons and sinful persons, and protect the kind and virtuous people. The gods save the world from suffering and

sins. When the world is overloaded with sins, Lord Vishnu comes to rescue in various forms. Such mythical faith gives courage to the virtuous and warns to the sinful. The figure of fish in the painting represents the Matsyaavatara, the first incarnation of Vishnu, who rescues the human beings from drowning in the cosmic flood. Due to such narrative, fish is considered as an auspicious symbol in Hindu rituals. The painting also has eco-critical significance in the sense that the fish is respected and sometimes protected giving the divine status. The god is in the nature (fish).

The figure of tortoise represents the Kurmaavatara, the second incarnation of Lord Vishnu. While churning the ocean for amrita (nectar), the mountain begins to drown. The tortoise saves the mountain from drowning and makes the mission successful. The amrita makes the gods immortal. The painting is strange, for the tortoise can bear the load of the entire mountain. How is it possible? It may be impossible in real world but it is possible in mythical world of divine beings. However, the painting has the meaningful message for the present society, that is, the right conduct will be supported, the right persons will be rewarded and criminals (demons) will be punished.

The painting of the Varahaavatara, the third incarnation, represents the figure of boar. The god in the form of boar lifts up the earth that has been drowned in the ocean. The sinking earth symbolizes the end of civilization. Because of the crimes, domination of the demons,

the presence of excessive sins and exploitation of natural resource, the nature and earth cannot tolerate. As a result, she drowned herself. The boar rescues earth and begins the civilization again. The figure of Varaha has the powerful body and heroic posture. The earth has been personified as the goddess in the female form. The earth is also considered as the mother goddess. Varaha presents the earth on his right elbow. The animal also shares human form, for its body resembles to human form to some extent. This activity of the animal is magical. However, the allegorical narrative has the broader significance that the creation and destruction of the earth and the universe is continuous process.

The Narsimha Avatara represents the figure of half man, half lion. This incarnation destroys demon king Hiranyaksipu and protects Pahlada, the son of the demon and the god's devotee. Hiranyaksipu had the boon that he would not be killed by both man and animal. So, the god takes the form of man-lion, and then kills the demon. The in-between-ness situation of Pahlada shows that the characters of human beings and demons are not fixed and predetermined. The attitude, actions and behaviors of the person determine his character. By birth, Pahlada is demon's son but by action and character, he is human and near to god.

The Vamanaavatara in the form of dwarf destroys the pride of the demon king Bali. The king boasts of his power of riches and offering gifts and donations. Lord Vishnu takes the incarnation of Brahmin and goes to

the palace of the King. He asks Bali for a small piece of land as much as he can cover in three steps so that he can sit there and meditate. The demon accepts to give the required land. As shown in the painting, Vishnu extends his left leg upward and covers the sky and heaven. In the second step, he covers the entire earth. There is no land for the third step. So, according to his own promise, Bali offers his own head to put the lord's foot. Then, Vishnu thrusts Bali to the hell with the divine power of his leg. The visual narrative suggests that a person becomes proud before his fall. On the other hand, we also learn that we should not underestimate any person. We never know the inner power of any person.

Parasuramaavatara kills all the sinful Kshetriyas of the earth using his axe. Kshetriyas are the persons to rule, maintain order in the country and protect people. When they decline from their duty, they are destroyed for replacement and regeneration. The allegory is equally relevant in our context as well. The rulers of our time have been corrupted and self-centered. Their rule will not last long. They will be displaced by the better ones.

Ramaavatara destroys the demon king Ravana of Lanka. In the war, he is assisted by his brother Laxman and his monkey friends. The monkeys have been personified, for they behave like human beings. They become devotees and help Rama in the war. Because of his lust, Ravana kidnaps Rama's wife Sita. We learn that the price of lust is the death. This is the

subject matter of the epic Ramayana. Krishnaavatara destroys the demon King Kansa and releases many people from his confinement and torture. Krishna also assists Pandavas, the virtuous people, to kill the corrupted and sinful people like Kauravas. The narratives about Krishna, Kansa, Pandavas and Kauravas can be found in the epic Mahabharata. Krishna breaks the established rules for the sake of righteousness. This shows that the rules are the construct of the society and the men. If they do not function for the better society, they should be dismantled to protect the right and the humble people.

The painting of the Buddhaavatara shows the Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu. Vishnudharma is the Hindu manuscript but it includes Buddha as the Hindu god. Such representation in art suggests the religious harmony between Hinduism and Buddhism in the then Nepali society. Even today, there is coexistence of both beliefs. On the other hand, this also signifies that Hinduism takes new ideas developed in its surroundings, integrates them in its own system and assimilates them as its own beliefs. Such unique representations in art and mythologies have pragmatic values that they create order and harmony in the society. Kalkiavatara is the last incarnation of Vishnu. This incarnation is supposed to take in the kaliyuga, our own era. The god in human form holding a sword on a horseback is expected to come down on the earth in future for the destruction the evils and protection of the virtue.

The narrative compositions in

the manuscript are the beautiful representations of the ideas in the Hindu mythologies. The paintings are didactic visual narratives. The characters and events are symbolic, mystical and magical. Strange and unusual things happen in the paintings. The figures and images stand for different ideas, settings and characters of our own time having universal significances. Anthropomorphic characters of both the divine beings and animals make the allegory more interesting and aesthetic. The technique of personification provides human characters to the animals like fish, tortoise and boar. The earth has been animated as the goddess. The activities of the characters are miraculous. Such features of the paintings communicate the moral values effectively.

The symbolic paintings on the cover of 13th century Shivadharm manuscript narrate the story of the union of Lord Shiva and Parvati, Linga and Yoni, individual self and the cosmic being. Lord Shiva is seated at the centre holding his consort Parvati. Parvati is sitting on the lap of Shiva. He is also holding trisula (trident) which symbolizes the three major functions of god -- "creation, preservation and destruction" (Min BahadurShakya 31). Parvati's vehicle is lion and Shiva's vehicle is bull. Such features create magical ambience. The Ganga River pours water from unfathomable hair of Lord Shiva. Ganesha and Kumara are the sons of Shiva and Parvati. They are also on their vehicles mouse and peacock respectively. The unusual combination creates supernatural

atmosphere. In the background of the painting, we can see the Mt. Kailasha, the home of Shiva and Parvati. Similarly, the 15th century Sivadharm manuscript illumination combines both erotic and spiritual concepts. The icon of Shivalinga is represented as the union of the male and the female principles. The two forces have been assimilated and appear as single entity. Lydia Aran comments on the significance of the Shivalinga:

Lingam (Phallus) . . . 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. There is an indentation on one side of the yoni, the purpose of which is to drain off the water poured over the Lingam as offering (78).

In Shivalinga, the disk has been penetrated by the solid upright round vertical shape. The union of sadhaka and almighty has been symbolically depicted in the union of Uma and Mahesvara, Vishnu and Laxmi and Samvara and Vajravara in other mythologies and religious paintings. The union of the self and the almighty, and the union of the male and the female are in parallel. The obstacles between the self and the other have vanished symbolizing the single entity in the universe. The sacred and erotic aspects are assimilated linking this life to the enlightenment or nirvana. The composition is considered as the key to open the spiritual and philosophical contemplation for understanding the universe and the self.



Shivadharma manuscript illuminations, c. 1450.

The compositions in the 18th century Devimahatmya manuscript narrate the magical story of the battle between goddess Durga and Mahisasura (the buffalo demon). Her companions in various forms destroy the demons Sumbha, Nisumbha and Raktabija. Mahisasura controlled the earth and heaven. The power makes him mad. Goddess Durga knows about his lust. By exploiting this weakness, she takes the form of a beautiful girl and lures him. As he proposed her, she challenged him for the battle. Durga's mount is lion. She has many weapons in her many hands. She attacks Mahisasura and kills him, for he underestimated her as a weak girl. Colorful rocks, green mountains and flowers are in the background of the painting. Such features create typical "Nepalese landscape" in the artwork (Gupta 23). The paintings narrate the concept that the pride, lust and domination prepare ground for one's death and destruction.

Most of the manuscript paintings are purely religious. Some of the manuscripts are about social values

and they only focus on teaching moral lessons to the people. Such didactic manuscript illuminations are found in Hitopadesa manuscript from 16th century. Two animal fables in visual form are remarkable in this manuscript. The paintings are narrative and didactic. In one visual narrative, an old and blind vulture goes to the home of birds and asks for work. The vulture looks after the baby birds. For this work, it gets food from the parents. One day a cat appears there, flatters the vulture and becomes its friend. Since the blind vulture cannot see, the cat climbs the tree, devours all the baby birds, throws the bones on the ground and goes away. The parent birds come home and know that their babies have been killed. They think that the vulture ate them. They become angry and kill the vulture. The visual narrative teaches the moral lesson that we should not believe in flattery. The flatterer can cheat us. The fable has anthropomorphic features, for the birds and animals act like human beings. The characters stand for



Hitopadesha manuscript illuminations, 1594.
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something else. Because of the use of beast and birds, the narrative becomes more interesting. As a result, it can teach moral lesson effectively.

The other fable in Hitopadesa manuscript is about a deer and a jackal. The jackal befriends with a deer. It lures the deer to a beautiful green field for grazing. But in the field farmers have put a snare to catch wild animals. When the deer goes to the field for grazing, it is caught in the snare. The jackal expects that the farmer will come and kill the deer for mutton. The farmer will throw intestines, hoofs and other useless parts, and he will satisfy his hunger from this, the jackal has thought this. But the Jackal does not get success in his malicious mission because the kind farmers come and release the deer from the snare. In the composition, we can see both the visual images and the verbal texts on the same page. The paintings again teach the moral lesson that we should not be lured from attractive things. They might have been shown to catch

us, to trap us. On the other hand, if we try to fulfill our desire by giving problem to others, we may not be successful.

The paintings in the Pancaraksa manuscript from the 13th century are also didactic and narrative. There are the figures of five goddesses. They personify five protective charms. The charms are believed to save people from smallpox, snakebite and other miseries and sicknesses. A composition presents goddess Mahapratishara seated at the centre. Ordinary people are consulting about their diseases and problems to the divinity. The goddess opens verses of Pancaraksa. Then, the disease flees away being terrorized. The disease has been personified like a human figure. The abstract quality becomes concrete. The disease behaves likehuman beings. The narrative scene is didactic. It teaches the moral lesson about the power of Pancaraksa manuscript. Even today, such manuscripts and religious texts are preserved and worshipped at home having the belief that they protect their family from diseases and other problems. Allegorically, this shows the power of words and knowledge. In the background we can see the landscape including trees. The figures have been painted with brilliant red, green and yellow colors. The margins have been embellished with geometric forms and floral design.

The compositions in the 12th century Vessantara Jataka manuscript are also narrative and didactic. They communicate the message of religious tolerance between Hinduism and Buddhism. Vessantara is a kind



Pancaraksa manuscript illuminations, 13th century.

prince. He gives people whatever they ask for if he has that thing. The neighboring kingdom is suffering from draught. The people from other country ask the prince for the white elephant. They have the belief that white elephant may bring rain. Vessantara gives away the elephant. The neighboring country gets rain and becomes prosperous. After some days, his own country suffers because there is no rain. The people revolt against the prince. The king banishes Vessantara from his country because of the public pressure for his exile. Vessantara leaves the country, goes to a forest with his wife, his son and his daughter. Vessantara is meditating in the jungle. One day god Indra disguises himself as a Brahmin, comes to the prince and asks for his daughter and son. Vessantara gives his children to the Brahmin. The children cry but the Brahmin takes them away beating with a stick. Indra reveals his true self and says that he has been testing the kindness and enduring capacity of the prince. Vessantara becomes successful in the test taken by Indra, the king of heaven. He returns his son and daughter. At last, Vessantara's country also receives rain. The people are happy.

Vessantara returns to the palace. The family again becomes together. The narrative painting teaches the moral lesson that kindness, altruism and helping others are very important. These are the essential elements of Buddha's teachings. The kindness of the person will be tested. He will suffer more and more but at last, he will be rewarded. This is the Buddhist manuscript but it integrates the Hindu character like god Indra. This shows the intermingling of different religions and harmony among the people of different faiths. The paintings are equally relevant even in our time.

The paintings in these manuscripts have spontaneous lines and flowing curves. According to Amita Ray, "the lines are sweeping and colour has almost a modeling effect" (Art of Nepal, 49). The figures are sinuous and round. The texture is vibrant. The human figures are lively and youthful.

Rajatananda Das Gupta comments on the stylistic features of these narrative compositions: 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 draughtsmanship

attains the height in the decorative motifs. Some landscape is also attempted by arranging stylized plantain trees at uniform distances. (10)

In these manuscript illuminations both the divinities and human figures are depicted naked from the waist upwards. The paintings present perpetual youth and beauty. Ram Niwas Pandey comments on traditional Nepali paintings: Though imbued with frontalism and two dimensionism, the paintings gleam with a vigor which is essentially aesthetic in flavour. The representation of the landscape and the vegetal surroundings in the portraiture is not less enchanting and resplendent. (43)

Generally, the figures are two dimensional. Landscape is presented in the background. Although the paintings represent divine characters and mythical world, they share human values. They try to resolve the dualities between Buddhism and Hinduism, individual self and cosmic being. The paintings are worshipped and prayed as the icons of divinities. They are not created for purely aesthetic purpose though they have beauty and attraction. The compositions are based on mythologies. About these traditional paintings, Amita Ray remarks: 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. Like that of India, Nepal has always aimed at achieving a synthesis of the

dualities of life. The worldliness and spirituality are complementary not antagonistic in Nepali thought. In the same way, perhaps life and art, the religious and secular, even Buddhism and Brahmanism are not separate entities. ("Plastic Art" 10-11)

The paintings depict the hope of the artists and devotees to achieve spiritual and moral qualities. They also make the viewers aware about their sin and the consequence. Their sins can lead them to hell and suffering.

Percy Brown comments on the spiritual and moral dimensions of these paintings: 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 worshipped rather than admired. (130)

These manuscript paintings are the essential parts of the religious and cultural life of the then contemporary society. Life, religion, art and education are closely linked. Divine figures are "created in the image of man" having both positive and negative features like "each human being is capable of both kindness and anger" (Pratapaditya Pal 12). The youthful figures always present the "vibrant sap of life" suggesting the prosperity and the beauty of human body (Ray, "Plastic Art" 14). In addition to aesthetic pleasure, the narrative paintings teach moral lessons exploiting fables and

allegories. Despite the fact that the characters appear divine, their actions are closely related to our own life in deeper level of interpretation. The spiritual and moral values they taught became the codes of life in later times. Since these values have been carved in the collective unconscious of the society, they have been followed spontaneously to some extent. Such ethical aspects have contributed to create order and harmony in the society.

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