



Quest of Identity in Paintings and Texts – Study and Recollections

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Abstract

This article presents a brief review of the exploration of identity in select early Nepali paintings and literary texts. Rather than providing a comprehensive analysis of the entire artistic and literary oeuvre, it focuses on identifying key trends. Portraiture is highlighted as a primary medium through which this theme is studied.

The broader subject of identity has long engaged the attention of scholars and art critics worldwide. This article serves as a modest reflection on that ongoing discourse, presenting it as a topic of both research and discussion. In the Nepali context, we observe that painters have frequently employed portraiture to express identity, often working in close collaboration with literary writers. The available examples suggest a notable harmony between visual art and literature.

A particularly striking case is that of the first Rana Prime Minister, Jang Bahadur, who strategically used both painting and literary text to construct and amplify his public persona. This article examines such interact practices, highlighting the creative intersections between artists and writers.

Having written on related aspects of this subject in earlier issues of SIRJANĀ, in this article I have chosen to focus more specifically on the patterns and examples of portraiture in Nepali art and literary texts from the same historical period.

Keywords: portrait painting, travel writing, Mughal court, contact zone, art education, text, art

Bhaju Man Chitrakar, *Portrait of Jung Bahadur Rana*, c. 1850s.
(Picture courtesy: British Library, London)

Jang Bahadur: Portraiture and text

Character study in paintings and textual writings are separate subjects. But some cases appear to mark a period in history where the anxiety of portrait making and description of individuals in language or text have happened simultaneously. Examples abound in Western paintings. We also find examples in the history of Indic, Chinese and Japanese paintings. In the case of Nepali paintings, the evolution of individual in art and literature has a very interesting history. But this subject has not been discussed by historians, let alone by art reviewers. They have been treated naturally as separate subjects and genres. There is no cogently written history of portrait making in Nepal.

This subject, however, has made an important history. The seventeenth - and eighteenth-century portrait making of individuals or groups in India must have made some impacts in Nepal, but this is a subject of a different essay.

The history of portrait making in the Mughal court and the tradition of portrait painting in Rajasthan style had some influence in Nepal. We do not know if the great tradition of the Mughal portraiture of the reigns of Akbar's son Jahangir (1569-1627) and his grandson Shah Jahan (1592-1666) had any influence in Nepal. The tradition of keeping atelier and the court masters was important. Historians have written about Jahangir's favourite artist Abu'l Hasan. We see an important connection of text and painting in the autobiography of the emperor titled *Jahangirnāma* in which his love for the painter is written in emotional language.

A brilliant art historian Goswamy (2016) has written a history of nearly a thousand years of the Indian painting and social and cultural milieu of that time. Portraiture and textual description of a certain person do not happen simultaneously unless it is written by the subject of the painting like the Mughal emperor Jahangir.

I begin with a recollection. A British scholar historian Dr. John Whelpton came to Nepal for studying the life and works of Jang Bahadur Rana (1817-1877) who founded the rule of the Rana dynasty in 1846 that lasted for 104 years. Jang Bahadur visited Britain and France as the prime minister of Nepal in 1850 spending several months abroad. That visit of the oligarchic ruler in Nepal is full of stories, some of which may sound little trivial today but hold important significance. Jang Bahadur was a clever and intelligent man who in his short sojourn managed to put various aspects of the visit together. Very importantly, he organised his entourage by fulfilling various conditions that a visit of that nature would require. A detailed study of the visit became available when the account of the visit written by a member of Jang's entourage was found later and published. I want to cite from my book on Nepali literary history:

The most important prose work of this time is Junga *Bahādura Ko Belāyata Yātrā*. The author is anonymous. The book describes the splendour, civilization and culture of Europe alongside the Prime Minister's visit

This book must have been written around the year 1853. He must be a high-ranking

man who could accompany the Prime Minister and remain by his side all the time. The following translation of one extract will show this:

“One day the ‘Kuin’ (Queen) invited the ‘Minister’ to see the dance of the nymph-like dancers, and he went to see. The dancing was going on. The beauty of the nymphs is beyond description. In the meantime, the Kuin asked the Minister if he liked the programme, and he replied that he did. Asked whether he understood the language of the songs, he said he did not. However, he added, he enjoyed the songs even as people enjoy the songs of a 'Bulbul' bird. His remark made her happy, and told her people that he was very smart.” (Subedi 1978:44).

Jang's concept of projecting the self was important in some ways. History does not show clearly a person who took up the cudgel to project himself as character through texts or paintings. That would be considered a little unusual condition. Jang Bahadur Rana appears to have that interest in projecting his self through paintings and texts. Our subject is portrait making and the projection of the person through text if any. Jang included both a text writer whose name we do not know today and a painter. The name of the painter is available to us. His works are also available. His name is Bhajuman Chitrakar. I have written earlier (Subedi 2021a):

In his team was a painter named Bhajuman Chitrakar who is said to have been influenced by some features of art in Britain especially

in the expressionist dimension of colour in painting. Though he did not bring about a big revolution in Nepali paintings, his art of portraiture and the use of techniques and colour marked a change in the methods used by the traditional Nepali painters, especially in the portraits. There is evidence to show that Bhajuman was associated with the house of Jang Bahadur Kunwar alias Rana.

An intelligent, senior art lover and good friend of mine, Mousuri Shumsher Rana said to me at one point that he had a nice collection of the portraits of Jang Bahadur and his family executed by Bhajuman Chitrakar. When a British historian and researcher Dr. John Whelpton came to Kathmandu to collect materials – both visual and textual about Jang Bahadur for his research, we were shown the very well-placed portrait art works of Bhajuman in his house on a Thapathali hump. I was very impressed by the details of Bhajuman's portrait art, who employed the pronounced colours and lines. The balance and composition of the figures is remarkably mature in those portraits. The features of the portrait show how Jang Bahadur's personality made impact on the onlooker. The portraits were those of Bal Narasingh Kunwar, the father of Jang Bahadur and his brothers, which is an important constellation to be found in individual collection.

Jang Bahadur's portraits were executed by the painter and his persona in the visit was projected by the travel writer, a member of his team. Both forms of projections were used to paint Jang

Bahadur's potrait as an impressive and royal character. The travelogue shows the pattern of the travel writer's portraiture of Jang Bahadur. The tradition of including a painter in the travel was given continuity by another powerful Rana prime minister Chandra Shumsher (1863-1929). The name of the artist was Dirghaman Chitrakar who was a well-known painter of that period as well as he was a good photographer. Chandra Shumsher appointed him as a Royal painter. Dirghaman, like Bhajuman, accompanied prime minister Chandra Shumsher on his trip to Britain in 1908. He had opportunity to paint views of Europe and study European art. Like Bhajuman, Dirghaman got a chance to enhance his knowledge of portrait making and paintings in general during his visit to Britain.

The portraiture of Jang in words was found in a Neoaku manuscript later and published in 1957 with a long introduction by Kamal Mani Dixit (1929-2016). But what interests me here is the portraiture of Jang in words. It seems, Jang was very keen on using both mediums of highlighting his persona carefully. After discussing the text, I will discuss some features of portrait paintings in Nepal and the backgrounds of the artists or painters, to be precise. The following extract from John Whelpton's translation of *Janga Bahādurko Belāyata Yātrā* will make it clearer. The writer chooses to describe a scene that would have definitely made Jang happy after he read the account. One extract goes like this (Whelpton: 2016: 149-150):

Every day throughout the rest of

his time in Belait individual nobles and officials in London took turns in issuing him with invitations, bringing him in the evening to their own houses and entertaining him there. On these occasions many officials with their memsahibs, ladysahibs and young women gathered together. Wearing elaborate jewellery and costume the nobles' wives, daughters and daughters-in-law all came up, took him by the hand and greeted him. While their husbands sat down nearby, the women came forward, asked the Prime Minister courteous questions, inspected his jewellery and clothing and talked in very respectful terms with him. Lords, dukes and officials brought forward their daughters and daughters-in-law—all of them beautiful young women—and asked him whether or not he liked them.

The above extract shows how carefully the travel writer was portraying the image effect of Jang Bahadur. His choice of the imageries and the colour is reminiscent of paintings. The travel writer's depiction of the movement of the people is theatrical. I find this description written by a Nepali writer in 1850 as a very important work. It is not certain if he composed his text in 1850 but he certainly must have written down the detail notes of the visit and the events just like a painting. The purpose of the writer was to project Jang's image just as it was that of the painter who too must have been awed by the dazzling somewhat funny imagery of Jang when we read it today.

Portrait painter's times and modus operandi

A portrait painter has limitations. The

portrait of the subject dominates the canvas—its centrality and also the field of action. But the Chitrakars did their best to incorporate what they considered as the aura of the portrait and the persona with the enhancement of effects through dexterous use of colour and forms.

These qualities did not come out in a consummate form in the early portrait paintings of the artists. They had to wait until the second decade of the twentieth century when Nepali art students Chandra Man Singh Maskey (1900-1984) and Tej Bahadur Chitrakar (1898-1971) were sent to study art to Calcutta by Chandra Shumsher Rana little less than a decade after he included artist Dirgha Man Chitrakar in his entourage.

We can see that a sense of perfection and the realisation of a need to train Nepali painters in Western style had occupied the minds of the rulers who were the main consumers of the skills of the painters. I have written the story of how Chandra Man Singh Maskey and Tej Bahadur Chitrakar were sent to Calcutta and how they were expected to fulfil their obligations (Subedi 2021a). After they returned, however, they found that their spheres were wider and their obligations very important. Tej Bahadur Chitrakar became a teacher of art at Durbar High School, and also became later the head of Juddha Art School. Chandra Man Singh Maskey expanded his training as an artist to include more than the regular practices of a painter in the ordinary sense of the term. Chandra Man Singh Maskey showed some paintings to me and narrated his experience about executing portraits including that of King Tribhuvan about which I have published an article titled *Chandra Man Maskey*

and *Tribhuvan's Moustache* in Kantipur of 19 December 2020. I have put one more narrative about Chandra Man Singh Maskey's portrait making in the following words:

Chandra Man Singh Maskey's art similarly made inroads into the world of politics, ceremony and history. He was even jailed by the Rana oligarchic administration for his political inclination. While in jail Maskey made paintings for an epic entitled *Sugat Saurav* written by his other inmate Newar poet Chittadhar Hridaya. The images based on the Buddha's life remarkably remind us of what I call the paintings of the twilight zones mentioned in the cultural debate as described by Tapati Guha-Thakurta in Calcutta alias Kolkata. (Subedi 2021: 13).

A note should be added here about Tapati Guha-Thakurta's argument about Indian art. Her book *The Making of Indian Art* (1992) covers discussions about artists, aesthetics and nationalism in Bengal during roughly 1850-1920. Thakurta has explained the important debate about the dual themes of westernisation of the art movements and practices that happened in Calcutta. Commercialisation and professionalization of Indian art finds a place in this debate. (Thakurta 1982).

The contact zone

Balakrishna Sama (1902-1981) was a doyen of Nepali drama. He also wrote very important poems including his epic work *Chiso Chulho* (1958). In the first edition of this epic Sama has made paintings to illustrate the story. His paintings coloured as well as black and white were used in the first

edition of the book printed in Calcutta. This epic is a spectacular example of an experiment made about the admixture of the paintings with the text. Here the context is little different. We began with the discussion that a strong ruler and founder of the Rana rule Jang Bahadur used both mediums – paintings and text to enhance his personality. That shows his power savvy mind and his careful choice of mediums for producing his impression. But here we are discussing about the anxiety of using painting and poetic imaginaries that enhances the effect of elocution. The poet painter's use of painting to enhance the effect of the text opens a related but different discussion. I want to cite the following paragraph from a chapter that I have written for a book being published by a British publication in India compiled and edited by a university teacher in America and my erstwhile student named Puspa Lal Damain:

The next one is the print of a black and white painting of *Rāta* or 'Night' also executed by the poet himself. The subtle effects of the paintings can be seen under the flash of the thunderstorm. A very carefully executed landscape painting of the city, fields, hills and the Himalaya appear in the flashlight. I had a rare chance to see some similar if not the same paintings with the poet. They looked little different from those in the epic text because of the size and use of the mediums but they were executed for the narrative purpose. The poet artist's subtle delineation of the perspectives is a remarkable feature of the paintings. But nowhere does the poet artist mention about the creation

of the paintings and the reasons for their inclusion in the book. Why the works of art and drawings are made unobtrusive is mentioned neither by the poet nor by any literary reviewers afterwards. This silence could be an eloquent subject of discussion about alterity in *Chiso Chulho*. (Subedi n.d.)

That silence, the contact zone of Nepali literary text and paintings was treated by Sama himself in his series of old paintings from the Rana ruling family to his wife Mandakini Devi. Amar Chitrakar made portraits of the Shah kings though they were not supported by any literary texts. Uttam Nepali (1937-2021) exhibited his paintings that created a consonance with the poetry of the modern Nepali poets at the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts in September 1975. He made the following poets whose oeuvre and the motifs of their paintings had made impressions in his mind. He was creating paintings that were supposed to represent the consonance of text and paintings. The poets selected by Uttam Nepali belong to a category of poets who are called modernist. They are Ishwar Ballabh (1937-2008), Tulasi Diwasa, Bairagi Kaila, Madan Regmi, Banira Giri (1946-2021), Basu Shashi (1936-92), Mohan Koirala (1926-2007), Krishna Bhakta Shrestha, Dwarika Shrestha, Kālī Prasad Rijal, Upendra Shrestha (1936-2010), Mohan Himanshu Thapa (1936-2023), Bhupi Sherchan (1937-90) and others. The 32 paintings mark a mood of experimentation in form, and the free use of motifs for both paintings and poetry. The experience of Lain Singh Bangdel, Manujbabu Mishra, Vijaya Thapa, Uttam Nepali, Tekbir Mukhiya and Kiran

Manandhar should be mentioned. Kiran Manandhar produced paintings based on the poetry where we were presenting texts, poetry or play.

The experience of the doyen of modern Nepali painting Lain Singh Bangdel is worth alluding here. A renowned literary writer and painter, Lain Singh Bangdel had an eloquent experience about portrait making. It would be relevant to refer to what the art historian and critic Dina Bangdel wrote about Bangdel's portrait making experience. She wrote how Bangdel had to make several attempts and experiments to execute B.P. Koirala's portrait in the end. Dina Bangdel (1002) wrote, "The portrait captures vividly the sitter's dynamic personality while the swift brushwork and warm colours, combined with an abstraction give the painting a sense of arrested movement". She went on to explain that position and the moment of giving shape to the portrait and say that anyone who would see B.P. Koirala's portrait with 'arrested movement' placed alongside those of other politicians and literary writers.

Conclusion

I began the essay by juxtaposing two different forms of texts portraiture and a travel account that the astute Nepali first Rana Prime Minister Jang Bahadur did create to bolster his personality in and around 1850. Though portrait painting appears to be a form used by the personas in power by employing the family painters the Chitrakars, textual descriptions were few and far between. Jang Bahadur's example opens up a new field of study for art lovers, dabblers and reviewers. Portrait making continued to occupy a place of prestige for a long time among the people in power. However,

the motifs of portraiture changed after the painters trained in Western and orientalist school in Calcutta used the art to paint the figures of common men and women. Following that time motifs of paintings became diversified, and so did the themes of the texts. Nepali psyche of using visuals in paintings and texts has its own character that needs more studies. Here I would like to end by citing my earlier words of tribute because I feel that they capture the spirit of the consonance of painting and text. "I pay tribute to Chandra Man Singh Maskey who treated portrait making with a spirit of jouissance and historical seriousness. But he also saw the futility of the exercise when the rulers and plebeians toy with it alike." (Subedi 2012)

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