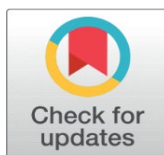
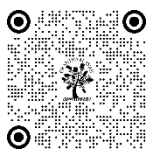


EXPLORING KRISHNA'S DEPICTION IN PAHARI SCHOOL OF PAINTINGS AS ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

The Pahari School of paintings is an art tradition that originated in the hilly regions of North India particularly in the present-day states of Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, and Uttarakhand. This school of painting emerged in the 17th century and flourished under the patronage of various rulers and nobility. This research attempts to explore Krishna's depiction in Pahari school of paintings to examine how these artworks symbolize artistic creativity and devotion. The study centres around the portrayal of Krishna to explore the artistic interpretation of Krishna narrated in religious scriptures and literature. Drawing upon visual sources and scholarly articles, the study analyzes various aspects of Krishna's representation in the Pahari paintings especially focusing on the emotional aspects captured by the artists. By combining religion with the philosophy of art, the research attempts to highlight the purpose of art as a mode of expression signifying art as a form of devotion and spirituality. Through a detailed analysis, the study highlights the relevance of Pahari school of paintings as a preserver of our cultural ethos.

Keywords: Art, Creativity, Devotion, Spirituality

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of Indian miniatures can be traced to the 6th and 7th century which evolved over centuries as a result of other cultural influences. Miniature paintings were usually depicted upon materials such as paper, ivory panels, wooden tablets, leather, cloth, marbles and wall which gave a unique look to the paintings. The themes depicted in the paintings had a lot of socio – cultural significance as they provided significant information about a particular historical period and its socio- cultural practices. Religion played an important role in providing a subject matter to the miniature paintings. For the Indian artists mythology became a prominent subject for the miniature paintings. The various miniature traditions which evolved during the 6th and 7th century were Mughal miniatures, Rajasthan miniatures, Phad paintings, Deccan miniatures, Tanjore paintings, Rajamala paintings and Basohli paintings. The depiction of Krishna in miniatures signified the growth of Vaishnavism and Bhakti cult in India. For example the miniature painting belonging to the Pahari school of Indian paintings inspired by Gita Govinda by Jaydev gives a clear indication of the development of Vaishnavism during the medieval period. With the spread of Vaishnavism, the Gita Govinda became a popular theme

for miniatures in various art centres such as Gujarat and Rajasthan. The miniatures represented the rise of a strong Vaishnavite culture.

The art tradition of India depicts two types of motifs. They are pseudo classical and pseudo folk. Both these themes have been influenced with the legends of Krishna especially relating to his encounters with Radha and Gopis. These motifs are also represented in music, dance, sculpture, temple icons and miniature paintings. Asha Goswami in *The Krsna* legend talks about the inter-relationship between varied art forms. According to her, “the different streams of art traditions which was the result of the inter-relationship of diverse artistic media were based upon creative expressions visualized through the sculptures, icons and the miniatures. In other words, these diverse art traditions can be termed as varied methods of presenting a legend from multiple perspective” (Goswami, 2001).

The art tradition (sculptures, iconography, miniature paintings, etc.) depicts the legend of Krishna in three main forms:

- 1) Art forms depicting amatory couples identified as radha- Krishna, Rukmini- Krishna and Satyabhama-Krishna.
- 2) Art forms depicting Krishna's encounter with demons
- 3) Art forms depicting narrative scenes from legends associated with Krishna, example Vasudeva carrying the infant Krishna, Krishna as a child stealing butter, etc (Goswami, 2001).

One of the earliest depictions of Krishna in miniature painting is the painted Bhagavata manuscript which is preserved in the Jaisalmer bhandar in Rajasthan. Gujarat from 12th century onwards had a long history of art tradition. Many temples in Gujarat depicts the miniature art tradition.

The Nathdwara centre which is an important centre of Pustimarga also has a rich collection of mural paintings ranging from 16th to 17th century which depicts many popular legends such as Raslila, Danalila and Gopastami. Paintings depicting legend can also be found at Udaipur, Kota, Bundi, Jaipur and Tonk. The Mewar style of paintings are a series of Ragamala painted in 1605 A.D. Most of the paintings of this series of Ragamala can be found in the collection of Sri Gopi Krishna Kanoria. The Bundi style of painting is similar to the Mewar style. The Bundi style of painting includes illustrated manuscript from the Bhagavad and series of the Rasikapriya. The Rasikapriya series of the Bundi style painting includes illustrations of Krishna forcibly trying to collect butter from a Gopi's pot but later on realizes that there is no butter in the pot, instead it contains a piece of cloth and some other object. The distinct characteristic of this style of painting is that it utilizes vibrant and glowing colours which gives a unique look to the Bundi style of Painting. Figure 1 depicts a painting from the Rasikapriya series depicting the association of Radha and Krishna.



Figure 1 Miniature Painting from Rajasthan School – Krishna and Radha from a ‘Rasikapriya’ Series in Udaipur Style Miniature of Mewar Sub-school

Source: Dr. Shuchi Srivastava. *Indian Miniature Paintings: An Incredible Cultural Heritage*. Open Access J Arch & Anthropol. 3(3): 2022. OAJAA.MS.ID.000563. DOI: 10.33552/OAJAA.2022.03.000563.

Apart from Rajasthan, the temple at Lepakshi in Andhra Pradesh which belongs to the 16th century preserves paintings depicts Krishna as Vatapatrasayi. Towards the south of India we can find paintings in Tanjore and Ettumanoor in Kerala. Sangita-Mandapa painting located at Vardhamana temple at Kanci (Tamil Nadu) which belongs to the 18th

century contains legends of Krishna in the form of ceiling paintings labelled in Tamil. Similarly, Vadakkumnathan temple of Kerala belonging to the same period contains paintings which depicts Krishna holding the mountain, legends relating to Krishna and Yasodha, Govardhanadharana, Gopis Vastraharana and Venugopala.

During the 18th and 19th century, a school of painting based on the legends of Krishna arose in Garhwal and Tambekar Wada in Baroda. Apart from Gujarat, Rajasthan and southern states of India, Kashmir is also considered as one of the main contributors of miniature paintings. Kashmir contributed miniatures right from 18th century onwards. The Kashmir miniatures depict Krishna performing rasa along with the gopis which are located in various temples in Kashmir. Many of the Kashmiri miniatures are now preserved in different museums of India. Besides the Kashmiri miniatures, the Basohli school of painting in Jammu portrays paintings depicting incidents from the Bhagavad Purana and Gita Govinda which further testifies the religious impulse of the region. The 19th century miniature painting from Assam Chitrabhagavata contains delineation of the legends of Krishna in the subsequent art tradition. During the Mughal period the miniature paintings containing the theme of Krishna were perpetuated in the Malwa style. These paintings belonging to the 17th-18th century delineate the legends which deal with the killing of demons by Krishna and his brother Balarama. Pandori which is situated in the Gurdaspur district of Punjab has preserved the miniature painting tradition since the 19th century. The Pandori paintings mainly depict Krishna's childhood activity. The Sheesh Mahal at Patiala preserves paintings of Krishna and Rukmini. The Pahari school of miniatures comprises of the region of Himachal Pradesh, parts of Punjab, Jammu and Garhwal. The miniature art tradition is also found in Kangra, Nadaun, Sujanpur Tira, Damtal, Dharamshala, Dada, Shimla and Chamba regions of Himachal Pradesh. Along with the other schools of painting which flourished in the Pahari region, another folk style of painting flourished in Kulu-Mandi area of the pahari region. The portrayal of Krishna lifting the Govardhan mountain on his little finger to save the people of Gokula is a famous miniature painting made in Kulu-Mandi style. This painting is now reserved in the national museum. Mahboob Zahid in "Depiction of Nature in Cultural Practice: A Study of Miniature Paintings in India" referring to the natural scenic background of Pahari school of paintings says "Besides, the beauty of the local landscape played an important role in some of the great works painted in the Pahari ateliers. The backgrounds with hillocks, gushing rivulets, green meadows and a variety of lowering trees and creepers were painted" (Zahid, 2017). Figure 2 indicates the painting of Krishna lifting the Govardhan Parvat.



Figure 2 Krishna lifting mount Govardhan

Source: International Journal of Society and Humanities, Vol. 11

In Orissa the miniature art tradition arose during the 17th century. This school of painting includes a manuscript of the Gita Govinda preserved in the Asutosh museum in Calcutta and an illustrated palm leaf script of the Bhagavad. The most interesting fact about the Orissa school of paintings is that it primarily uses palm leaves as a medium for illustration. Apart from the given mainstream school of paintings, many new styles of painting emerged during the 15th and 16th century which emerged due to the influence of Persian and other foreign styles. These styles remained isolated from the mainstream school of paintings. The group of miniature paintings which arose during the first half of the 16th century was called 'Kulhadar group'. This group of paintings includes illustrations of the Chaurapanchasika- fifty verses of the

thief by Bilhan, the Gita Govinda, the Bhagavad Purana and Ragamala. Figure 3 indicates a painting belonging to the Orissa school illustrating Krishna with milkmaids inspired from the Gita Govinda.



Figure 3 Miniature Painting from Orissa School - Krishna and the Milkmaids from the Gita Govinda

Source: Dr. Shuchi Srivastava. Indian Miniature Paintings: An Incredible Cultural Heritage. Open Access J Arch & Anthropol. 3(3): 2022. OAJAA.MS.ID.000563. DOI: 10.33552/OAJAA.2022.03.000563.

The sources of the legends of Krishna depicted by the various art forms present him as a legendary hero and we tend to accept the legend as history because of which it has become impossible for us to extract the reality from the varied legends preserved in the Puranas. The legends that the various art traditions refer to appear simultaneously in the brahmanical and non brahmanical works. The Puranas which are the major brahmanical source of the legends are written in legendary and mythical style. This is the reason why many episodes of his life has been transferred from one generation to the other as myths or legends. Apart from brahmanical and non brahmanical sources, accounts given by the foreign travelers also provide us with valuable information on the varied perspective of the legends. The accounts by the travelers constitute a major source of the legends. They act as a guide to the Indian traditions. For example the accounts given by Alberuni and Abul Fazal on ancient and medieval India, especially Tarikh al-Hind of Alberuni written in 1030 A.D. give us a glimpse of the Puranas and other scriptures which give a new understanding to the teachings of the scriptures and texts.

The legends are generally considered to be the works of imagination but their root lies in a specific tradition and set of beliefs. Legends have varied perspective for example: physical, historical, allegorical, ritualistic, artistic, etc. which makes them vast and diverse. This varied nature of the legends allowed the artists to interpret the legends according to their own understanding and context. Hence, the themes portrayed in the miniature paintings offer different meanings and perspectives. The sociological importance of the legends lies in the fact that they reflect the successive stages of culture and civilization. The legends are also didactic in nature. They not only narrate the stories of a great saint or a deity but also provide ethical instructions to us. Therefore, the various forms of art such as sculpture, iconography and painting not only narrate stories of a deity but also provide ethical instructions through the legends that they depict. In this sense the various forms of art which embodies these legends are not merely works of art, they also act as a philosophical guide to us.

Many factors have contributed to the formation and representation of the legends of Krishna. For instance, imagination born out of religious and philosophical fervor got united with the historical tradition of Krishna which got passed on to the next generation as a legend which finally takes the form of a painting, sculpture or any other art form. As a result, legends became a part and parcel of Hindu mythology which enriches human life and it is the various art traditions which preserves the legends and makes them everlasting.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative study which attempts to explore the representation of Krishna in the Pahari school of miniature paintings through the philosophy of art propounded by Leo Tolstoy. By applying the approach of Tolstoy, the study aims to provide a comprehensive view of art as a means of expressing devotion and spirituality which involves a detailed study of the scholarly sources to gain an indepth understanding of art as a form of expression in reference to the Pahari school of miniature paintings.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Pahari school of miniature paintings aesthetically captures an array of emotions such as joy, mischief, tenderness and playfulness by depicting vivid imageries inspired from the tales of Lord Krishna such as playing the flute in the gardens of Vrindavan, his divine association with Radha. Figure 4 indicates the painting from Kangra school depicting Krishna trying to captivate Radha's attention by playing enthralling tunes on his flute. Furthermore, the paintings also portray the scenic beauty of the Himalayas with its exotic mountains and water falls which serves as a background to Krishna's portraiture. The paintings are also endowed with the depiction of the auspicious symbols such as the peacock feathers and Lotus which stands for purity and divinity which conveys the artistic intention to establish a harmony between man, god and nature. The natural setting of the Pahari school of paintings reflects the innate connection between nature and spirituality where nature is viewed as the manifestation of god himself.



Figure 4: Painting from Kangra, dated to circa 1825, L A C M A, Los Angeles, U S A. Wikimedia

Source: Gita Govinda – Enchanting Paintings of An Epic Text from the Pahari School of Paintings (caleidoscope.in)

With reference to its narrative structure, the theme of miniature school of paintings correlates to the teachings of Bhakti poetry which adds emotional depth to the themes of the paintings depicting lord Krishna. The idea of divine association and intense devotion propagated by Bhakti poets such as Mirabai, Surdas is a recurring theme of the Pahari paintings. For eg: There are portraits of Radha yearning for Krishna against the backdrop of the Brindavan garden in a moonlit night celebrates the idea of divine love that conveys a sense of fulfilment. The soulful depthness of Bhakti poetry is captured by the artists where we find many depictions of Krishna's Ras Leela inspired the composition of Jaydev and Surdas. For eg: The representation of Radha in Jaydev's Gita Govinda is a recurring theme in Pahari school of paintings.

Pronoy Chakraborty in The Place of Radha in Gita-Govinda explores the role of Radha as the divine consort of Krishna. The divine association of Krishna and Radha as adhara-adheya (the container and the contained) is a celebrated theme that is widely represented in the Pahari school of paintings. The idea of memory which is a powerful medium to relate emotions of love and separation is artistically represented through the paintings belonging to the Kangra and Basohli school of paintings (Fig. 5). The Garhwal school of painting captures the Lila-Hava or the essence of ecstatic love where Radha imitates Krishna by dressing herself similar to that of Krishna (Fig.6). Furthermore, the journey of

emotional connectivity or Anubhava is a theme dominantly portrayed by artists of Garhwal school of paintings (Chakraborty, n.d).



Figure 5: Folio with colophon, dated 1730, by Manaku; Basohli School; The Lahore Museum
Source: (DOC) Illustrations to the Gita-Govinda.docx | Pronoy Chakraborty - Academia.edu



Figure 6: Garhwal painting of early nineteenth century showing Lila-Hava, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift from A.K. Coomaraswamy
Source: (DOC) Illustrations to the Gita-Govinda.docx | Pronoy Chakraborty - Academia.edu

The theory of art propagated by Leo Tolstoy conceptualizes art as a form of communication. According to Tolstoy, the strength of art lies in its ability to facilitate emotional experiences from the artists to the audiences through artistic creations. The essence of art lies in its authentic expression of devotion and spirituality as depicted in the Pahari school of paintings where the spiritual and devotional themes inspired from the tales of Krishna are aesthetically depicted through the paintings. One of the prominent features of the Pahari school of paintings is the illustration of the eternal bond between Radha and Krishna where the spirit of ecstatic love is elucidated through various scenes borrowed from mythological narrations such as stories and devotional poetry. This strong association of the artists with their art can be correlated with the idea of contagious art propagated by Leo Tolstoy in his book What is Art where he mentions about three primary conditions that determines the infectiousness of art:-

- 1) On the greater or lesser individuality of the feeling transmitted;

- 2) on the greater or lesser clearness with which the feeling is transmitted;
- 3) on the sincerity of the artist, i.e., on the greater or lesser force with which the artist himself feels the emotion he transmits (Tolstoy, 2022).

In reference to the Pahari school of paintings, the spiritual engagement of the artists with their art reflects the sincerity of the artists as they have honestly preserved their religious values through memory which they have conveyed through their paintings. Sincerity as an artistic attribute is deeply explored by Tolstoy. According to him "I have mentioned three conditions of contagiousness in art, but they may be all summed up into one, the last, sincerity, i.e., that the artist should be impelled by an inner need to express his feeling. That condition includes the first; for if the artist is sincere, he will express the feeling as he experienced it. And as each man is different from everyone else, his feeling will be individual for everyone else; and the more individual it is - the more the artist has drawn it from the depths of his nature - the more sympathetic and sincere will it be" (Tolstoy, 2022). Another significant aspect of the Pahari school of paintings that correlates to Tolstoy's notion, is the idea of art being a social phenomenon. Art according to Tolstoy, is pervasive in nature and is present in all aspects of society. The conventional notion of art being a mere representation or expression of an aesthetical idea is challenged by Tolstoy as he considers art as "A means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity" (Tolstoy, 2022). This approach is suggestive of the social value the Pahari school of paintings contain as they promote solidarity among its community members by imparting shared religious beliefs and cultural heritage which acts as a unifying force reinforcing communal harmony.

4. CONCLUSION

Applying Tolstoy's theory of art as a form of communication to the Pahari school of miniature paintings gives a valuable insight into the social and spiritual dimensions of this artistic tradition. By depicting themes of spirituality, love and devotion, the artists of the Pahari school of tradition presents an authentic representation of art which transcends the boundaries of culture and space to elucidate emotions of peace, love and devotion. Furthermore, the Pahari art traditions cover all the variant streams of thought narrated in the religious texts and poetry which gives us an in-depth understanding of our cultural heritage which evokes spirituality and devotion among its followers. The importance of the miniature art tradition lies in the fact that they enable us to trace the geographical extent and popularity of the legends of Krishna and also reveal its influence on the masses. Besides they also highlight the interpretative aspect of religion in our country where art becomes a powerful medium to convey religious beliefs merging the notion of art and spirituality.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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