

SOME ASPECTS OF THE EAST INDIAN MANUSCRIPT PAINTINGS

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The three most important sources for the study of the East Indian Manuscript Paintings are : (i) the dated illustrated Manuscript Paintings of the Pala Sena Period (ii) the undated illustrated Manuscript Paintings of the said period & (iii) the dated Nepalese Manuscript Paintings. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century. the corpus of material was first exposed to the scholarly world. Rajendralal Mitra (in his Catalogue of the Library of the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1882) and Gecil Bendall (Catalogue of the University Library Cambridge, UK, 1883) compiled and edited the vast mass of palm leaf manuscripts discovered from Bengal-Bihar and Nepal respectively. A number of eminent indologists, thereafter have made substantial and significant contributions in the study of the East Indian Manuscript paintings in their different aspects. In the field of iconographic study it was A. Foucher (*Etude Sur L Iconographie Bouddhique de LInde*, 2 Parts, Paris, 1900 & 1905), followed by S.K.Saraswati (*Tantrayana Art An Album*, Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1977), D.C. Bhattacharyya and others have made critical work on the subject. In the study on the stylistic issues related to the Manuscript Paintings have been discussed by Stella Kramrisch (*Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, Vol. I, No.2; N.R. Ray (in the *History of Bengal*, Vol I & *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, Vo1.5, in the relevant Chapters); SK.Saraswati (*East Indian Miniature Painting*, Chhavi 1, V 01.1, Benaras 1971; Palayuger *Chitrakala* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1978), P.Pal & MeechPekarik (*Buddhist Book Illuminations*, New york, 1988) and others.

The East Indian Mss. Paintings of both the dated and undated ones unfold fascinating subjects of the history and culture of the time. In the Eastern Indian Mss. of Bengal-Bihar such dates are given with reference to the year of one or other Pala ruler apparently to be counted from the year of accession to the throne. But from the Mss. the exact year of accession of none of the Pala rulers can be determined with certainty. Hence, the chronological data provide in the colophons of the Mss. is 'approximate' not conclusive.

The dated murals provide substantial information about the stylistic trend of the East Indian miniature and their chrnological sequences. An examination of their sequence will help to understand that they are evenly distributed over the period and the style of the Mss. Painting

remained active from circa tenth to the fourteenth centuries A.D. The earliest known dated East Indian Manuscript Painting assigned to the year 6 of the reign of Mahipala (1) (c.980 - 1028 A.D.), while the last one is designated to one Madhusena (of the Sena dynasty) of the Saka year 1211 (c. 1289 A.D). The dates mentioned in the colophon of the Mss. are to be taken as the date of copying of the sacred texts concerned. The illustrated Mss. dated in the regnal years of the Palas are : Mahipala (1), Gopala (II), Nayapala (c.1027\28 -43 A.D.), Ramapala (c.1072- 1126 A.D.) and Govindapala (c. 1161 -65 A.D.) and the contemporary ruling dynasties of the Chandras, the Varmans afterwards the Senas of Bengal. In the geneology of the Palas there were two rulers in the name of Mahipala and three rulers bearing the names of Gopala, obviously separated from the other by a pretty long gap of time.

In the proto-medieval period, India and Nepal had close cultural relations for historical and geographical reasons. The Nepalese Mss supply firm dates in an era known as Nepalese samvat (commenced :&om 879-80 A.D). Dated Nepalese Mss. are extremely significant at least for two reasons. First, they help to suggest the extension of East Indian style of Mss. Painting, and secondly, for cross-checking the chronological and genealogical issues relating to the East Indian miniatures. The Nepalese Mss. are written in Newari script. The earliest known dated illustrated Nepalese Mss. is in Nepali samvat 135 (1015 A.D.), while the last available one is NS 385 (1265 A.D.). At least three Nepalese illustrated Mss. have labels, that describe the subject s depicted in the miniature.

The illustrated East Indian Mss. of the Pala-Sena period and the Nepalese Mss. are immensely valuable for the study of the state of Buddhism of the period in the one hand and the Buddhist art and iconography on the other. Occasionally, the details portrayed in some paintings provide information about some lost types of East Indian medieval architecture as well.

The Mss. are mainly the copies of the sacred Buddhist texts. In the lists of illuminated Mss. Paintings, the majority of them are copies of the sacred *Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita*. In terms of numerical position the texts available are : the East Indian dated Mss. 16; in the undated series it is 4; in the list of dated Nepalese Mss. the number is 11. Hence, the total number of the texts known is 31. In addition to that one Ms. of a larger version of the text known as the *Panchavimsati-sahasrika-Prajnaparamita* is also available. The other Mss. in terms of popularity are the copies of the sacred text Pancharaksha. The number of dated illuminated from Eastern India is 7; while the undated one is 3. Nepalese Mss. of the text are yet to be known. The aggregate number of the illuminated *Pancharaksha* Mss. is 10. The remaining Mss. Paintings are the copies of the sacred and Tantric texts viz., the Dharini and others whose total number is about 18.

The approximate number of Paintings found in the Mss. are more than five hundred, if not more. In addition, a substantial number of painted wooden covers have been discovered, whose figure is about fifty or more. It is clear hence, the total number of Paintings in the Mss. and their wooden covers are a commanding one and obviously deserves serious consideration too.

In terms of the theme or subject matter, the Paintings depicted the incidents in the Life of the Master(Buddha), Bodhisattvas in their different manifestations and hosts of Buddhist divinities both male and female, with their unique iconic types and varieties. The very important question that strikes one about the theme or content of the Mss. Paintings is their relevance with the texts. As has been noted above that the greater portions of the painted material belong to the *Prajnaparamita* Mss. It is of interest to note that the basic content in which the text delves, is the virtue of transcendental wisdom, and so to say, is an area of pure metaphysics. This being so they do not suppose to provide any scope for pictorial representations, in the Mss. of such kind of texts. But the paradox is that by far numerically the largest number of paintings of Eastern India and Nepal came from the Mss. of these texts. The representations of the goddess Prajnaparamita the personification and embodiment of transcendental wisdom, which invariably appears among the illustrations might have certain relevance to the texts. The themes widely represented in a schematic and conventional manner are the Eight great incidents in the life of Buddha viz., Nativity; Enlightenment; First Sermon; Offering honey to the Monkey; Miracle at Sravasti ; Taming of the mad elephant Nalagiri; Descent from the *Trayastrimsa* heaven and *Parinirvana*. Frankly speaking, they have hardly any connection with the *Prajnaparamita* text itself. The extensive pantheons of the *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana* Buddhism, from which again a large number of themes had been drawn, is also of “no concern of the *Prajnaparamita* text”. The question that has been raised by some scholars is that how can one account for this apparent lack of connection between the illustrations and the text of the Mss. There must have been a conscious motive behind this vast mass of painted material.

The Eastern Indian Mss and their Nepalese counterparts were the reflections of the contemporary popular Buddhism which was perhaps, an assimilation of *Prajnaparamita* and *Tantra*. The Pala monarchs patronized both the Schools of thought and their patronage made this combination possible, leading Buddhism to a creed of esoterism. Edward Conze is right when he says “the ideas represented in these illustrations have grown out of the teachings of the *Prajnaparamita* itself, at least they emanate from the spirit behind it.” As a treatise expounding the virtue of transcendental wisdom it was held to be highly sacred and the Mss. of the texts were always meant to be recited and worshipped. The Pala Mss. bear records of such recitations and evidence of their worship through centuries. The texts categorically

recommends the writing, reading and reciting of the book as a source of religious merit and enjoins the adoration and worship of the text with flowers, wreaths, incense, rows of lamps and other ritualistic items. Hence, the book itself was invested with a magical power perhaps helping in the attainment of the transcendental wisdom. This concept is also reflected in the epigraphic referenc (to the Mss. of religious texts) as dharmaratnas. In the frequently repeated statement of the donors of the Mss. that such acts of merit might enable all beings, beginning with the preceptor, the teacher and the parents, to attain the transcendental wisdom. To this the Mahayana attitude was added the belief propagated by the Tantra that one has extinguished one's individuality in emptiness (*sunyata*) which is the ultimate reality according to the *Prajnaparamita*. Buddhism was gradually transformed, perhaps, into an esoteric creed. The East Indian Paintings, belongs to a period when that creed was showing its optimum vitality. The illustrations then, in whatever Mss. they appear with any theme, were meant as " supports for a meditation which aimed ultimately at the full enlightenment of a Buddha". The underlying concept was the devotion that leads to ultimate reality.

The principal representation in the *Pancharaksha* Mss. (7 dated are known) are the Five Protective goddesses: *Mahapratisara*, *Mahamayuri*, *Mahasahasrapramardini*, *Mahasitavati* and *Mahamantranusarini* of the *Pancharakshamandala* and of the *Dharini* texts. These texts themselves belong to the creed of esoteric Buddhism and the avowed purpose of the illustrations was to "conjure up these divinities in order to help the worshipper in identifying himself with them." In a way, the obvious connection between the illustrations and the texts offer the clue "to a proper comprehension of the import of the illustrations in other Mss., including those of the *Prajnaparamita*" Indeed, they follow a well ordered pattern of thought.

It has been held by art historians that the Pala sculptural art had its foundation on the Gupta Classical idiom. The Pala Paintings in the Eastern School likewise have its beginning in the Indian tradition of Painting of the Gupta Classical epoch, seen in its best in the murals of the Ajanta and Bagh caves. The testimony of Fo-kuo-chi relating to the drawing of pictures, probably miniatures at Tamralipti (modern Tamluk in the Midnapur Dist., W. Bengal) by Fahien, in the early 4th century A.D. followed by the evidence of the Harshacharita (by Banabhatta) about the inclusion of "boxes and painted picture boards and pieces of painted cloth", in the list of presents sent to Harshavardhana by Bhaskarvarman of Kamrupa (Assam) in the early seventh century A.D. indicates a tradition of miniature Painting in Eastern India in the Gupta and PostGupta times. As the Eastern School of Painting came into being in the Pala epoch, it had its antecedent in the Classical tradition. The earliest extant examples will strengthen the hypothesis. The East Indian style of Mss. Painting reached its climax in the Pala-Sena period(

c. 750- 1205 A.D.). The Western Indian miniatures started at the same time, the earliest dated one is 1060 A.D.

As opposed to the plastic conception of the 'Classical', the 'medieval trend in its full import emerged in the proto-medieval period, is entirely linear". The lines again are angular and brittle losing much of their modeling capacity". The three dimensional art of sculpture in the proto-medieval period seems to have been little affected by the medieval concept. At least the impact was not so strongly felt in the two-dimensional art of Painting, as the latter was more susceptible to the linear trend of the medieval. The story of proto-medieval Painting, is the story of gradual subversion of the Classical norm by the medieval. Throughout the period, as the visuals of the miniatures testify, there was a swing between the Classical and medieval. The idiom is clearly evident in the early dated Paintings of the Pala period, namely, the Asiatic Society Mss. (No. 4713) dated in the year 6 of the reign of Mahipala (I). Here the illumination narrated the Birth of Buddha. With regard to the treatment of colour, they gradually becomes thinner with a corresponding loss of plastic feeling. The modeling capacity of the line, though valid till the end, grows weaker and to a certain extent swayed by the sharp and angular linearism of the medieval trend. The Mss. Painting of the c. eleventh- twelfth century dates, display the swing between the two vital and opposing trend. The medieval elements, as a conscious factor, is known to have made its intrusion in the East Indian Mss. Paintings of the pre-Ramapala (c.1072-1126 A.D.) period, and is clearly evident in the miniature of the *Astahasrika-Prajnaparamita* of the year 5 of Mahipala (II)'s reign.

The colours of the East Indian Mss. Paintings were confined to white, yellow, blue, red, black and green. They were generally derived from minerals, ochres and a few other substances. To ascertain the actual ingredients of the colour of the Paintings generally used, a proper scientific investigation is necessary. In fine it may be stated that the wide range of information available in the different Silpa texts about the Miniature Paintings as a whole, combined with the objective and critical study of the visuals in the illustrated Mss., one may arrive at several significant and interesting findings with a reasonable amount of certainty.

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List of Illustrations



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Mahapratishara, Eastern India C. Sixteenth Century A.D.
Cambridge University Ms. No. ADD 1647