

Miniatures on the Wall: Murals of a Shaivite Temple of Banaras

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Abstract:

The paper is mainly a case study of murals of the Shaivite temple, Trayambakeshvara temple, of Banaras, renovated in the mid-twentieth century by the Paikpara royal family of Calcutta. Subjectively, the paintings are related to different sects of the Hindu religion. Through the methodology of descriptive and stylistic analysis, the paper reveals various layers of different cultures and styles. The paintings are big in size and painted in the sanctum of the temple and bounded or framed by painted architectural gateways. Stylistically, the paintings are affected by the north-Indian miniature style and depicted in the form of stand-alone images, not in narrative style.

Keywords: Banaras, Murals, Shaivism, Paintings, Hindu Temple, Iconography

Introduction:

The eighteenth century onwards has been a favourable period for the city of Banaras in regard to its artistic landscape. The art and political economy of Varanasi had been closely interrelated. Several rulers had come to Varanasi and settled down here over a period of time, and contributed to its art and culture. They had patronized temples, havelis, ghats, etc. in this city. Apart from the rulers, many traders and moneylenders or bankers (*Sahukaras*) came to Varanasi and settled down here over a long period of time and went on to fund the building of ghats and temples. Since the eighteenth century, the Marathas have taken much interest in Kashi. Large colonies of Maharashtrian Brahmins began to settle here, and with them the tradition of Vedic learning resumed in Kashi. We can say that a type of cultural renaissance overtook Varanasi in the 18th century under the impact of the Marathas. Bajirao Peshwa I patronized Manikarnika and Dashashwamedha ghats and built many residential quarters.¹ Before the Marathas, Rajasthani rulers in Varanasi were much powerful, especially those of Bundi and Amer.² The relation of Varanasi with the kings of Jaipur started with Raja Mansingh in the age of Akbar. Mansingh had built a Man mandir in Varanasi, and Sawai Jaisingh built the laboratory of Astrology at Man Mahal ghat.³ The oldest evidence of coloured wall paintings is found in the Chunar fort of 1591 CE. These paintings are affected by the Bundi style of Rajasthan.⁴

Banaras has a long history of migration of people from Bengal. Historically, it dates back to the age of Dharampal (752-794 AD), Devapal, and Madanpal of the Pala dynasty of Bengal. In fact, the Madanpura *muhalla* of Banaras was named after the ruler Madanpal. The second phase of migration began with the

¹ (Singh 2008, 110)

² (Mishra 2002, 70)

³ (Pandey 2002, 83)

⁴ (Chandramouli 2012, 304)

arrival of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Banaras in 1514 AD. At that time, many people came to Banaras with Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and settled in different parts like Gayghat, Vishveshwaraganj. The temple dedicated to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu still exists in Banaras. The third phase of migration occurred when Rani Bhavani of Nator province of Bengal came to Banaras and was accompanied by many of her relatives.⁵ Rani Bhawani played an important role in shaping the cultural and religious practices of Banaras.

The temple that will be discussed here is the Trayambakeshvara Temple, situated near the famous Lolarka *Kunda* in Bhadaini, near the Assi region of Varanasi. It is located in a garden which is a part of Tulsi Kunj. Although it is a Shiva temple, the painting on the inner walls shows a range of iconography related to Vaishnava and Sakta cults. A careful visual study of the paintings has revealed different historical layers, which add to the interest in these wall paintings. Our main source of information is a plaque in the temple that indicates that it had been renovated by a Bengali royal family, Paikpara Raj, in the mid-twentieth century.⁶ Tulsi Kunj was then the property of the royal family of Calcutta, Bengal. Now, it has passed on to a priest or a *mahant*, Vishvambhara Nath Mishra, of Sankatmochana temple.

The temple architecture is built in the It is in *Nagara*⁷ style with highly decorative patterns in relief. This style of temple was abundantly constructed in the city between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. It is situated on a high plinth and its staircase is flanked by two crocodile (*Makara*) sculptures. The temple faces the north direction, and its sanctum has four doors facing each direction.

Wall Paintings of the Temple:

On closer study, the paintings reveal layers of different styles ranging from Rajasthani, Mughal miniatures to the local styles of Banaras. What is remarkable about the intermixing of styles is the Mughal features, which dominate the style of presentation of the figures and their aesthetics. All compositions are framed by the painted temple gateway-like structures. Figures are drawn on plain backgrounds of red colour. Most of the faces of the figures are shown in profile. It is indeed striking how many Hindu gods and goddesses are shown holding a flower, akin to how Mughal emperors are depicted. Even the painted architectural elements show Mughal decorative patterns and foliated arches that frame the painted scenes.

The eastern wall contains the paintings of Ram-Lakshman-Sita, Garuda, and Hanuman, while the western side shows the depiction of Krishna, Balaram, and Kartikeya. On the northern side, we see the paintings of Ganesha, Shiva, and Sheshashaayi Vishnu. And on the South wall, we come across Annapurna, Bhairava, and Durga images. The eastern and western walls have Vaishnava themes in the centre in the form of Ram-Sita-Lakshman and Lord Krishna. North and south walls exhibit figures from the Shaiva and Sakta sects in the centre of Lord Ganesha and goddess Annapurna, respectively.

Given the equal importance given to all these images from different cults, it is hard to decide the temple's prime cultic affiliation. Only three paintings out of twelve are directly concerned with Shaivism and depict Shiva-Parvati, Ganesha with attendants, and Kartikeya.

⁵ (Basu 2014, 39)

⁶ <https://murshidabad.net/history/history-topic-kandi-paikpara-raj.htm>

⁷ This is one of the three main classical architectural styles of Indian temples. These three styles are *Nagara*, *Dravid*, and *Besara* styles.

The Eastern Wall:

This wall consists of three sets of images in three panels framed by pillared multi-foliated arches: the central panel consists of Rama, Sita, and Lakshman facing the direction of kneeling Hanuman, who is paying homage to the trio.



Image 1 Eastern Wall of the sanctum. Ram, Sita and Lakshman flanked by Garuda on the left and Hanuman on the right.



Image 2 Hanuman paying homage to Ram, Sita, and Lakshman.

Let us look at the central panel in detail. Ram and Sita are holding a flower in their right hand and sitting on a floral couch while Lakshman is shown standing and holding a *Chaamar*, or a fly-whisk. Hanuman is depicted as standing with hands folded in *anjali* mudra and gazing at the trio adoringly. It may be noted that the skin colours of each of them are different. While Sita and Lakshman are shown more or less in pale colour, Ram is in deep greenish blue, while Hanuman is in red. All figures are richly ornamented and shown with clothes decorated with either floral motifs or polka dots. Ram is the main protagonist of the

epic Ramayana, son of King Dasharatha of Ayodhya, and Sita is his wife and the daughter of King Janaka of Mithila. Lakshman is the younger brother of Ram. Hanuman is a divine monkey and the son of God Vayu. He is a fervent devotee and companion to God Ram.

On the left-hand side of the central panel on the eastern wall, we see the painting of Garuda, the vehicle of Vishnu. In mythology, he is regarded as the king of birds, but he is often depicted in an anthropomorphic form as a male deity, as shown here. He is associated with the vehicle of Lord Vishnu. Like Hanuman in the central panel, Garuda is shown standing cross-legged; his left hand holds a snake that also faces the central panel. A pair of wings springs from both sides and helps us to identify this figure as Garuda.

Garuda's fight with serpents is similar to Vishnu's combat with the demons, especially the serpent-demons. If Garuda is a type of ornithomorphic form of Vishnu, the bull is a theriomorphic form of Shiva. The panel on the right depicts Hanuman rescuing Ram and Lakshman on his shoulders from the Patal loka, or the nether world. The story belongs to the *Lanka Kanda* of *Ramcharitmanas* in which Ravana's brother Ahiravana had abducted Ram and Lakshman in their sleep, in the disguise of Vibhishana, and hidden them in the *Patal loka*. Hanuman is the lead character of the Ramayana. He did all the important work and was present at all the important occasions of the narrative. He is regarded as the paragon of devotion, or Bhakti, or Sewa, and no other God has been portrayed in this manner in Hindu mythology.

The Southern Wall:



Image 3 Southern Wall of the sanctum. From left to right – Goddess Mahishasurmardini, Goddess Annapurna and Bhairava.



Image 4 Goddess Annapurna offering grains to Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh. Central Panel.

As we explore the wall facing south, we encounter a depiction of Goddess Annapurna. Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh are depicted approaching Annapurna and begging for food. Annapurna is regarded as the goddess of food and nourishment in the Hindu pantheon. In Varanasi, there is much importance given to this goddess. She is prominently present in the popular visual culture of Banaras in calendars, small-sized sculptures, etc. The main temple dedicated to this goddess is situated near the Vishvanatha temple in the Godouliya area.

So, Annapurna holds a special resonance in Varanasi: she is not only the goddess of food or nourishment, but also seen as a manifestation of goddess Parvati-consort of Shiva. Given that Shiva is a prime deity of the city, Annapurna also assumes prominence.

A *shloka* of Annapurna *stuti* describes the goddess Annapurna as a Shiva's wife Parvati.

अन्नपूर्णं सदापूर्णं शंकर प्राणवल्लभे

ज्ञानवैराग्यसिद्ध्यर्थम् भिक्षाम् देही च पार्वती॥

Many Hindu texts such as *Skanda Purana*, *Linga Purana*, *Devi Bhagawat Purana*, etc. describe the story of Annapurna. In fact, the famous Sanskrit scholar, Adishankaracharya also wrote Annapurna *stuti* to honour the goddess.

The central panel of Annapurna is flanked by the image of Mahishasuramardini on the left. The story of *Mahishasur-vadha* is described in the third chapter of *Durgasaptashati* or *Devi Mahatmya*, a part of *Markandeya Purana*. When Mahishasura wanted to overpower Adishakti Durga, they both fought, and finally, the buffalo-headed demon, Mahishasura, was killed by the goddess in this war. After that, the goddess got the epithet Mahisha-Mardini or Mahishasurmardini. Many Saktaa texts, such as *Devi Bhagavat Purana*, *Durgasaptashati*, *Devi Upanishad*, etc., vividly eulogise the goddess: they describe her heroic act of holding up the demon by his hair as if he were a small child tossed in the air. Her mount, a lion, is painted as very vivacious and lively, and his face looks like a human face with a moustache; he is also shown with a pair of wings.

The image on the right-hand side of the central panel is that of Bhairava. Bhairava is also a prominent god in the city. This is said that there are Ashta or 8 Bhairavas in the city. Bhairava manifests terrifying aspects

of Lord Shiva. There are many famous temples of Bhairava in the city, such as Laat Bhairava in Lath Saraiyan (Mushlimpura), Kaal Bhairava in Maidagin area, Batuk Bhairava in Kamachha area of Varanasi, etc.

Kaal Bhairava is said as a ‘*Kotwal* of Kashi’. Here, after the death, *Bhairava yatna* has to suffer in place of Yamayaatna, because Bhairava handles those who commit sins. There are eight Bhairavapeeths established in Kashi. These are *Rurubhairava*, *Chandbhairava*, *Asitangabhairava*, *Kodhanbhairava*, *Kapalibhairava*, *Unmattabhairava*, *Samharabhairava* and *Bhishanabhairava*. These eight Bhairavas are described in the Kashi Khanda of the *Skanda Purana*.

The Western Wall:



Image 5 Western wall of the sanctum. From left to right – Balaram, Lord Krishna and Kartikeya.

On the western wall, the central panel consists of Lord Krishna playing a flute between two women attendants or *gopis*. While Krishna is shown from the front, the *gopis* are shown in profile. On either side, there are two cows painted with their calves.

According to mythology, Krishna’s birth took place in the Yadav community; therefore, in his story, cows have a prominent presence. He killed many asuras or evil beings, but the prime one among them was the king of Mathura, Kamsa. Kamsa had killed all the children of Devaki and Vasudeva, but Krishna was saved by being exchanged with the child of Yashoda. Krishna is a major deity of Hinduism. He is the God of love and compassion and takes the form of the eighth incarnation of Vishnu. The term ‘Krishna Leela’ is very relevant in the tradition of Indian classical literature and art, in which the story of Krishna’s life is written or depicted glamorously. Many Puranas and epics such as *Bhagwat Purana*, *Vishnu Purana*, *Brahmvairvata Purana*, and *Mahabharata* glorify the life and story of Krishna.

In the left panel, there is a depiction of Balarama. he is said to be the elder brother of Krishna. He also assumes as the incarnation of Shesha Naag, the huge serpent on which Vishnu reclines in Kshirsagar. Sometimes, he is included in the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu as the eighth *avatara*. There are many

names of Balarama, such as Haladhara, Halayudha, Samkarshana, Balabhadra, Baladeva, etc. Formerly, the worship of Balaram was very popular in the Mathura region. Many Puranas reflect his stories as a Samkarshana. *Mahabharata* describes him as an *avatara* of Sheshanag. He is the God of agriculture and strength. He holds a *Hal* (plough) and a *Musal* (pestle) in his right and left hands, respectively. Next to Lord Krishna on the right is an image of Kartikeya. Sometimes, he is adorned as a six-headed, *Shadaanan* (षडानन) in religious scriptures. Kartikeya is the son of Lord Shiva and Parvati, but it varies in many references in early texts of Hinduism. He is the elder brother of Lord Ganesha and is known for his leadership of the armies of God. Mainly known for killing the demon Tarakasura.

The Northern Wall:



Image 6 Northern wall of the sanctum. Left to right – Lord Shiva, Ganesha and Sheshashayi Vishnu.

The central panel on the northern wall depicts Ganesha, the son of Shiva and Parvati; he is flanked by his two wives, Riddhi and Siddhi, who hold a flywhisk and a pot in their hands. Below, there are two rats symmetrically facing each other, which are the *vahanas* of Ganesha. The composition is symmetrical and is iconic as opposed to narrative.

Ganesha is also the god of wisdom, intellect, and learning. He is worshiped first at the beginning of any religious ceremony. There are many stories in Puranas or other religious texts of Hinduism related to his elephant-headed or firstly revered god, or for breaking Kubera's ego of prosperity, etc. In Varanasi, there are Fifty-Six Vinayak (*Chhappan Vinayak*) temples, which are widely famous and worshiped. According to Kashi Khand, for the security of Kashi, there are seven rounds of Vinayak established in each of the eight directions, which totals 56 in number. There is mention of Seventy-one *Vinayakpeeth* in *Kashi Khand*. Many other texts, like *Krityakalpataru* or *Linga Purana*, have variations in the number of *Vinayakpeeth*.⁸

⁸ (Sukul 2008, 100)



Image 7 Lord Shiva and Parvati.

On the left side of the central panel is Lord Shiva, painted with four arms, in which three are holding the damru (musical instrument), trishula (trident), and an antelope, the mount of deity Chandra. The fourth arm supports the goddess Parvati, who is sitting on the left thigh. The figure of a bull and a tiger is painted below Shiva's image. Bull is a vehicle of Lord Shiva, and the Tiger is of the goddess Parvati. A sage is standing politely in attendance near Shiva and Parvati.

The painting on the right-hand side of this wall is that of Sheshashayi Vishnu. Vishnu is shown reclining on the great serpent Sheshanag in *Kshirsagar*, milk-sea. He is accompanied by his consort Lakshmi massaging his feet while sage Narada stands with a musical instrument, Iktara; Brahma is seated on the lotus, who is attacked by the two demons Madhu and Kaitabha. Vishnu is the prime god of the Hindu religion and mythology. Vaishnavism is a main sect related to Vishnu, which has a doctrine of Dashavatara, ten incarnations of Vishnu, in which Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narsimha, Vamana, Parshuram, Ram, Krishna/Balarama, Budhha, and Kalki. These are the *avatars* who, from time to time, descend in the material world to establish the *dharma*. Garuda is the vehicle of Vishnu. Generally, there is a popular perception that Banaras is a city of Shiva. But it is not right. According to the Hindu texts like *the Puranas*, which describe the city formerly as a city of Vishnu. Later, it transformed into a city of Shiva. *Narada Purana*, *Vamana Purana*, and *Brahmvairvata Purana* clearly mention this. Even after this city became *Shivatirtha*, there is a tradition to worship first Vishnu and then Shiva. Therefore, Vishnu is revered there from ancient times.

Image Analysis:

The paintings, as we have seen so far, are painted in the *garbhagriha*, sanctum sanctorum, of the temple. Generally, the paintings are large in size and painted in triptych, along with a miniature style on each wall of the *Garbhagriha*. There is a red background covering the inner wall on which the subjects are painted. This is a common practice in the miniature style of painting, as in Pahari or Rajasthani miniatures. The subjects of Hindu mythology, which are painted here, are also very common in Indian art. These are sculpted or painted across the country. This temple is the only place in Assi that has miniature paintings on a large scale in its sanctum. We will look into the elements of the paintings one by one. One of the

striking features in the paintings is the painted architecture around every composition. These are in the form of gates, pillars, or building facades that intersperse the murals. The painted columns are rich in detail in terms of the motifs of lotus and Kalasha. Kalasha is painted near the bottom part of the pillar, whereas the top is characterised by a lotus either upright or upside down. The arches are multi-foiled. The formal quality of the paintings strongly reflects miniature traditions of India. Thin and lyrical lines, sharp and contrasting colours, and the style of composition are some common elements related to that tradition. Let us begin to analyze the formal qualities of paintings –

The image of Garuda is uniquely painted in the temple. Most of the paintings of Garuda in the miniature tradition have been transformed into their aberrant form. The commonly painted Garuda's figure has been transformed into a parrot form with a green body, a red beak, and rounded eyes. This painted form of Garuda is rarely seen in the miniature tradition of Pahari or Rajasthani. The iconographic depiction in the painting is like a Vaishnava Brahmin with a moustache. Who has a Vaishnava *tilak* on his forehead and clad in a Yellowish Dhoti and Navy Blue Patka, decorated with a *Booti*. The position of Garuda and the serpent is like standing in the honour of God. The same colour of his body and background is being merged with each other. He has two small white wings and a *mukuta* on his head. He is exquisitely dressed and ornamented. This type of iconographic depiction is rarely seen in other painted scenes of Garuda. The holding of the serpent in the hand of Garuda is not like an inimical or hostile one. Serpent and Garuda are depicted as being friendly to each other.

The painting of Ram-Lakshman-Sita is compositionally quite similar to a folio of the Dashavatara series related to Mankot, Jammu, and the mural painted in *Devataji ki Haveli*. The position of all figures in murals is the same as in these two images of the *Ramayan*. According to space, the backgrounds of all three images are changed, but the position of Ram-Sita and Lakshman is in the same tradition, instead of a variation in space and time.

In respect of ornamentation, these murals show figures of gods and goddesses who are richly adorned with profuse jewellery. Not only are the figures exquisitely ornamented, but even their bodies are decorated with small decorative motifs. Especially, the images of male gods have their upper arms and shoulders decorated with trihedral, tetrahedral, or squared motifs. The faces of Ram, Lakshman, Sita, Hanuman, and Krishna are decorated with makeup with patterns drawn that stretch from the forehead to the cheeks. It is my surmise that these may be connected religious plays and performances, or Leela, that are carried out in the city on festivals.

In Banaras, there is a rich tradition of *Ram Leela* or *Krishna Leela*, which are conducted every year. The plays of *Ramayana* and *Krishnaleela* are carried out across Banaras in the form of street plays during the festivals of Dussehra or *Janmashtami*. Ramnagar is famous for *Ramleela* plays, *Naati imalee* is for *Bharat Milap*, Chetganj for *Nakkataiya*, Tulsi ghat for *Naag Nathaiya*, such episodes of the mythological stories are famous in specific locations of Varanasi. In this function, the faces of the main characters of the play are decorated with Kumkum, Roli, Chandan, etc. materials.

An ethnographic approach of comparing the wall paintings with the surrounding visual culture of Banaras may be more rewarding than an art historical approach of comparing two styles of painting across different regions.

Let us turn to the ornamentation of Garuda as a case in point. He is profusely decorated with ornaments to the extent that his hand is shown wearing a *Haathphool* on the back of his hand. Usually, this particular piece of jewellery is meant for women. Moreover, his right shoulder shows a square-shaped painted pattern with floral motifs at its corners. None of the miniatures show such hyper-ornamentation in the case of

Garuda. The same observation applies to Shiva's head, which is richly ornamented. A type of flocked Tiara ornament is intertwined in his braided hair. Again, close attention to the headdress or mukuta of the gods and the goddesses will reveal that the similarity with the headdress in the miniatures is superficial. These *mukutas* on the wall paintings have, in place of flower buds pinned on the top, there are tall and thin feathers pinned up in a row.

In the murals, some panels have been painted with a distinct iconographical quality. Image 4, goddess Annapurna is giving alms to Shiva, who is standing with Brahma and Vishnu. There are variations found in the depiction of goddess Annapurna in Varanasi.

Another unique feature concerns the iconography of Lord Shiva (image 7). In the left hand, Shiva is holding an antelope, which, according to Hindu mythology, is a vehicle of the deity, the Chandra or the Moon. In the Puranas, Lord Shiva is given the epithet of 'Chandradhara', the bearer of the deity Chandra on his head. However, over here, in place of Chandra on the head of Shiva, he is depicted as holding the mount of Chandra, an antelope. Shiva holding a *parshu* or *mrig*, deer, in his upper hand, is depicted sometimes in South India.⁹

Conclusion:

The paintings of the temple are exquisitely depicted with the Hindu mythological subjects of various sects. The gods and goddesses are lavishly adorned and decorated with different types of bodily ornaments. Mainly, the figures are painted not in a narrative style, but it seems that the compositions have the effect of popular calendar art; the figures are stand-alone images. The painting of Ram-Lakshman-Sita is flanked by Garuda and Hanuman on either side. In the city, it can be observed that many Vaishnavite temples' gateways have a depiction of Garuda and Hanuman on either side. The North Indian miniature style of painting is dominant in the mural. In the late 18th century, Jawan Bakht, the elder son of Mughal emperor Shah Alam II, came to Varanasi after being exiled. Many artists also came with him, amongst them Lalji Musavvir was the main Mughal artist. This period saw the amalgamation of different styles. The local painting style of Varanasi began to feel the impact of the post-Mughal style. Lalji Musavvir started to teach this style to the local artists of Varanasi.¹⁰ Sikkhi Gwala, a local artist who had painted in Rajasthani style earlier, picked up post-Mughal style from Lalji Musavvir. A new stream of mixed style of Mughal and Rajasthani flourished through the descendants of Sikkhi Gwala in Varanasi. Ustad Batohi, the son of Sikkhi Gwala, painted many paintings on walls and papers in this style.¹¹ Thus, in the style of Banaras, an amalgamation of different painting styles can be observed. What is further remarkable in these murals is the extent to which the Mughal architecture of multi-foliated arches is integrated into the painted architecture that acts as a backdrop for the murals. Most striking is the gesture of holding a flower, commonly found in the Mughal regal portraits, which is imbued to show gods and goddesses like Ram and Sita. An emperor holding a flower was regarded as a symbol of nobility and power, an attribute that appears to be easily transferred onto the Hindu gods and goddesses. This gesture is a new feature that gets easily accepted into the Hindu iconography of eighteenth-nineteenth-century mural making in Banaras. It dramatically reveals how conspicuous the assimilation of the Mughal aesthetics into the Hindu iconography is.

⁹ (Marutinandan Tiwari 1997, 20)

¹⁰ (Chandramouli 2012, 306)

¹¹ (Shrivastava 2008, 16)

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