

# Re-assessing the Islamic impression on Odishan Paintings

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## Abstract

Though, Islam is against the idealisation of form and there could not be an Islamic School of Painting, In the contemporary literary works of Amir Khusrav Dihlavi, Shams-i-Shiraj Afif, Maulana Daud etc. there are references to wall-paintings and painters. Odishan school of painting is divided into four branches i.e., Mural, Patta, Palm-leaf and Paper painting. The paper painting in Odisha received momentum during and after the Muslim rule in Odisha. The growth and evolution of paper paintings have been done in a restricted sphere; the paper paintings of Odisha depicted court life. There are three categories of paper painting in Odisha. There are also a few motifs paintings which are very popular in Odisha it is said that all these paintings are religious art but also have secular themes.

**Keywords:** Dasavatara, Hiranyakasipu, Bhagavata, Gopalila, Pajjama Bhagavata, Ramayana Manuscript and Mural Painting

## Introduction

The art of painting is one of the highest manifestations of creativity. Man seeks to bring into existence a world of imagination, beauty and truth which rivals the world of everyday experience and seeks to transform it near to his heart's desire. The painting of this age exhibits a unique style of wondrous beauty scenes of everyday life, pageantry and simplicity, splendour and penury, heroism, and cowardice, but behind the entire scene is the totality of expression of an integrated approach to life of unity in multiplicity. In this way to the European mind, Mona Lisa's smile might appear intriguing, but at the hands of an Indian painter, her smile would have been either self-satisfaction or self-abrasion.

Islamic impression towards the development of a composite style of painting was immense. Though, Islam is against the idealisation of form and there could not be and never was an Islamic School of Painting, since the pre-Islamic days when Mongols came to conquer and rule over a large part of China, Mesopotamia, and Iran and all these countries were one-way or other had come under the influence of Indian culture. Later on, China turned to Buddhist wall frescoes and colour painting according to Buddhist Indian traditions which became widely prevalent there since the seventh-eighth centuries CE. The Mongols introduced this kind of painting in Persia; a country of noble cultural tradition. The result was a fusion of a Chinese-Persian style of painting on paper and with Bihzad of Herat, an acclaimed painter, a distinct Persian School of painting developed.

However, politically the advent of Islam in India began in the first quarter of the eighth century CE. In the course of time, the Sultanate ruler became the sole power of India. Despite that not a single miniature or illustrated manuscript has so far been identified as definitely emanating from the Sultanate of Delhi. In the contemporary literary works of Amir Khusrav Dihlavi, Shams-i-Shiraj Afif, Maulana Daud etc. there are references to wall-paintings and painters.<sup>1</sup> Hence, it is clear that during the Sultanate period in India, the art of miniature painting or manuscript illustration did not get patronage from the rulers of the Sultanate period, though many of the rulers built up large libraries and Madrassas, which might have contained illustrated manuscript need to be identified.

In this way, the situation was different in some of the provincial Sultanates, especially in Malwa, Mandu, Jaunpur and Ahmadabad, where manuscripts were prepared and illustrated. The most

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<sup>1</sup> R.C. Majumdar, ed, *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, Vol. VII, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1994, P. 803.

important and interesting Manuscript painted at Mandu, the *Nimatnama*, a treatise on the art of cooking, is Nasiruddin Khalji, Son of Ghiyasuddin Khalji and many of the miniatures illustrated the portrait of the former. The *Nimatnama* give reference to a developed tradition of Mandu, revealing a close affinity with contemporary Persian paintings. The colour is bright and lively, the foliage rich and fresh and the human figures naturalistic and beautiful.<sup>2</sup> Hence, we can draw a line that, the miniature painting were exquisitely developed during the reign of other provincial Sultanate ruler which had an impression of Persian miniature paintings. The Mughal school of painting represents one of the important phases of Indian art. The numerous miniatures illustrating historical events, literary passages, court scenes, portrait studies, natural history drawings, genre scenes etc., painted during the Mughal period opened a completely new concept in Indian art. The execution of ideas in the Mughal miniatures shows something never seen before in India and their ever-lasting impact reverberated throughout the Indian peninsula including Orissa.

Mughal rulers are known as the great patronisers of art. Their master artists hailed from centres of Persian art traditions that flourished in Central and Western Asia. The master painters of Persia who served Humayun, namely Dost Musauwir, Maulana Yusuf, Maulana Dervish Muhammed, Mir Musauwir (or Mir Mansur), Mir Saiyid Ali and Khwaja Abdus Samad greatly contributed to the evolution of the Persianise school of Indian art.<sup>3</sup> The Mughal school of painting with its distinct style that emerged during Akbar patronage depicts the imprints of the Safavid and Timurid art traditions and some of the influence of the classical Indian School, especially in the manuscript painting; the best testimony to this provided by the illustrations of the *Tutinama* MS in the Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland (c. 1565-70 CE). The *Anwar-i-Suhaili* MS in the School of Oriental and African Studies, London (1570 CE) and the *Hamzanama* (c.1565-80 CE) fragments.<sup>4</sup> A careful study shows that the various modes of visual narration were found and continued later in the Mughal period.

The ingenuity of the Mughal narrative technique lies in the treatment of the visual field, even though it comprises multiple views and objects drawn from different planes. It represents the integrated picture of an event with action, which can unfold the different events coherently. The Mughal pictorial narratives are imbued with naturalism. Realism was marked in the bird and animal figures depicted in the Mughal narratives from the very beginning. These narratives are more natural and self-possessed. Thus, the liveliness of the picture is remarkable.<sup>5</sup> The painter during that period was basically employed for illustrating pages of celebrated books. The illustrations of *Dastan-i-Amir Hamzah*, done by Mir Saiyid Ali, *The Raphael of the East* and Khwaja Abdus Samad, are colourfully depicted with vivacity. However, the Indian influence soon predominated, and the line and colour got integrated. One can find more realism in the whole picture. This mode can be seen in the copies of the paintings of the *Khandan-i-Timuria* and the *Padshahnama*,<sup>6</sup> which are preserved in the Khuda Baksh Oriental Library, Patna in Bihar.

### Impression on Odishan Painting

It is in records that Odisha has maintained a commendable appreciation in restraining herself in welcoming foreign cultures and getting extinct in it. On the contrary, it has guzzled most of the major cultural systems within the Great Cauldron. Several famous cultural waves swept over India also touched the land and people of Odisha but, time and again Odisha has proved to be with its original style in the field of creativity of painting maintained a unique place in Indian History. Odisha

<sup>2</sup> M. Yamin, *Impact of Islam on Orissan Culture*, Readworthy Publication (P) Ltd., New Delhi, 2009, P.242.

<sup>3</sup> B. Biyat, "Tadhkira-i-Humayun Wa Akbar", (Persian), M. H. Hussain, *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1941, PP. 67-69, 117.

<sup>4</sup> S. P. Verma, "Painting under Akbar as Narrative Art", in I. Habib, ed, *Akbar And His India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997, P. 149.

<sup>5</sup> S. P. Verma, "Illustration of Persian Classics in Persian and Imperial Mughal Painting", in M. Alam, F. N. Delvoe, M. Goborieou, ed, *The Making of Indo-Persian Culture*, Manohar, Delhi, 2000, P. 233.

<sup>6</sup> M. Kidwai, ed, *Impact of Islam on India and the World*, Anmol Publication Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 2003, Vol. II, P. 233.

has a rich convention of painting. Like her architecture and sculpture, painting has also a distinct school of its own. The tradition of painting in comparison to architecture and sculpture is more ancient. The painting in Odisha reveals a continuous tradition from pre-historic to modern times.

We have the history of the birth and decay of several regional schools of painting in India viz., the Buddhist school of Ajanta, Brahmanical school of Ellora and in the medieval period Rajput, Mughal and Pahari painting have developed with immense vitality in the painting history of India and have gone into oblivion with the passage of time but, the impression of Islam still found in the painting of Odisha is indeed, appreciable. Odisha has experienced the administration of Muslims for only a period of one and a half centuries. Moreover, the administrators or Subedars had devoted much of their time to consolidation and fighting out the Afghans of Bengal and Qutub Shahi of South. The native Princes and Feudatories were taking advantage of it and enjoyed semi-independent Status. So, only the coastal district of Odisha was under the control of Muslims. In this troubled political scenario, we found very limited Islamic impact on the painting of Odisha. The degree of intensity of impact of Islam on Odishan paintings needs intensive research and more findings.

Odishan school of painting is divided into four branches in totality making it unique and colourful. These are Mural, Patta, Palm-leaf and Paper painting. There is a regular exchange of ideas and motifs between these four branches and these positive interchanges have helped to enrich the painting in Odisha. Influence on Mural and Patta paintings is negligible because it is inspired by religious beliefs. In the *Dasavatara* painting the theme of Nrisimha tearing open the bowels of Hiranyakasipu depicts the customs of Mughal. The Asura king Hiranyakasipu wears a stripped *pajama* and pointed half shoes. The use of stitched garments with vertical parallel bands is an influence from the Mughal style court. In the Mural and Patta paintings in *Ramabhiseka* paintings the demonic characters like Jamvabana and Bibhisena are found in the same dress code. Though Jamvabana and Bibhisana are not demonic characters and have friendly ties with Rama the dress has been given to strike a difference between divine and asuric personification. In the *Thiabadhia* painting the Raja of Puri stands with folded hands in *patri patis*, a stitched garment is depicted without vertical lines making it remarkable.<sup>7</sup>

In the palm-leaf painting illustration has a narrative content which bears the identity of the Mughal. The Mughal painting is generally found in the manuscript painting which is called as miniature painting. The Odishan miniature painting tradition which is basically an art of the lines scratched over an oblong palm-leaf with an iron stylus was unable to capture this loud colour scheme of the Persian-Safavi-Mughal landscapes. All that reflects a few costume styles and human bodily attributes. The characters like Mahisasura in the *Sakta Purana*, Kansa in the *Bhagavata*<sup>8</sup> and Ranasura in the *Ushavilasa*<sup>9</sup> and other attending figures are dressed in Muslim attire with full or half leaved tight coats, sherwanis, coats crossing over the knees, coats with painted hanging, pajamas, tight trousers, pointed shoes and pagdis. The demonic characters were dressed in Muslim costumes. This is because the Muslim administrators mostly figured as oppressors which is why they were depicted as low. Similarly, the divine characters like Ram, Krishna etc. were dressed in Hindu costumes like dhotis, uttariyas in bare bodies. All these depict the Islamic Impact on Odishan painting. In other regional paintings, Krishna wears a *Jama* in Muslim fashion whereas in Odishan School of painting, Krishna is always bare-bodied with his pitamvara and uttariya sometimes it was found that Krishna has a long plait braided with tassels hanging down at the end.

D.N. Pathy remarks that “this is more of a Deccani influence than the Northern Muslim fashion.”<sup>10</sup> In the Odishan painting, the female figure never has a Muslim costumes. The divine Hindu

<sup>7</sup> D.N. Pathy, “Orissan Painting”, *O.H.R.J.*, Vol. XXX, No. 2, 3 & 4, 1984, P. 160.

<sup>8</sup> The *Bhagavata* Palm-leaf manuscript preserved at Orissa State Museum, Bhubaneswar.

<sup>9</sup> The *Ushavilasa* palm-leaf manuscript preserved at Orissa State Museum, Bhubaneswar.

<sup>10</sup> D.N. Pathy, “A Search for Muslim Identity in Orissan Paintings”, in P.C. Panda, ed, *Impact of Islam on Orissan Culture*, Directorate of Tourism, Sports & Culture, Bhubaneswar, 1981, P. 31.

figures were put sarees with no blouse or undergarments or choli, ghagaras and odhanis. It is stated that choli and ghagra is influenced by Andhra Pradesh, mention may be made that the use of landscapes and architectural patterns in palm-leaf illustration is not influenced by the Muslim miniature paintings because there is limited scope in narrow formats of palm leaf for the depiction of aerial perspectives and palaces.

### Impression on Paper Painting

The tangible contribution of the Mughals to Odisha is the introduction of paper for official documents and for painting purposes. The paper painting in Odisha received impetus only during and after the Muslim rule in Odisha. The Muslims had little interest in palm-leaf, they used paper-maintained records on paper and wrote the scriptures on paper. The popular view is that paper was introduced by Muslims in 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. Moti Chandra is of the opinion that especially Western India obtained the knowledge of paper-making through the Arabs. The specimens of such paintings are preserved in the Odisha Museum in 39 sheets.<sup>11</sup> The growth and evolution of paper paintings have been done in a restricted sphere like Mughal paintings, the paper paintings of Odisha depicting court life remained faithfully confined to the courts of Khurda and Cuttack. There are three categories of paper painting in Odisha.

The first category is the paper manuscript painting on the *Bhagavata* and the *Ramayana*. The second category of paper painting is mostly on the court art dealing with secular themes, which are kept in Ashutosh Museum, Kolkata, painted on heavily primed paper and mounted on cloth these paintings speak of a glorious tradition of Odishan miniature painting. In Odisha State Museum, Bhubaneswar a hoard of unidentified copies of Mughal miniatures paintings mixed with Rajput paintings are preserved. This seems to be the product of a few Karkhanas or painted studios which employed local as well as Muslim artists who sought the patronage of local Muslim rulers.<sup>12</sup> More research will unfold the names of the Muslim and the Hindu painters in these karkhanas. Hence, the Muslim influence on portraiture Odishan painting cannot be denied in this way the portrait of Abhimanyu Samanta Sinhara painted on an ivory plaque in an oval format said to have been painted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE. at Cuttack bears the marks of miniature Mughal painting in Odisha.<sup>13</sup>

In the Ashutosh Museum, Kolkata, there are three paper paintings preserved out of which one painting depicts the episode of the reception of a Muslim embassy by an Odishan king.<sup>14</sup> The king was seated in his palace with an Abyssinian guard and two attendants in the horizontal composition. According to Basil Gray, "the general effect of this picture with its sumptuous colour of red, yellow, green, brown and orange, the superb characterisation of the protagonist speciality of the arrogant hook-nosed Muslims and the amplitude and bravura of the design, is unlike that of anything from contemporary India".<sup>15</sup> The other two paintings are "Horsemen on the March" and "Gopis or the moonlit banks of the river Yamuna". In these paintings, the style of costumes and beards speak of Muslim identity. Full-sleeved coats with waving strips and turban matching the pattern of the dress, sharp and angular features of the body and the speciality of the faces with dramatic gestures make the painting unique from other paintings. Naturalism is highlighted in these paintings.

The architectural patterns and the composition of background found in the paper paintings of the *Bhagavata* and the *Gopalila* one can find the identity of the Muslim impact. Mandapas (pavilions) are looked alike in Mughal and Odishan paintings. The mandapas of Mughal paintings are profusely bedecked with intricately decorated carpets. The Mandapas are crescent-shaped arches, the use of minarets, turrets and dome-shaped roofs in the painting of Odisha is influenced by the Mughal

<sup>11</sup> B.C. Ray, *Orissa under Mughals*, Punthi Pustak, Calcutta, 1981, P. 151.

<sup>12</sup> N.C. Behuria, *op. cit.*, P. 135.

<sup>13</sup> D.N. Pathy, "A Search for Muslim Identity in Orissan Paintings", *op. cit.*, P. 32.

<sup>14</sup> D.N. Pathy, "Orissan Painting", *op. cit.*, P. 170.

<sup>15</sup> D. Barrett, & B. Gray, *Painting of India*, the World Publishing Company, Cleveland, USA, 1963, P. 474.

mandapas. The Darbar scene also has the impact on Islam in Odisha here a king sits and behind him an umbrella holder. In this way according to Charles Louis Fabri from a scene of probably Ramayana he says “it shows a king and queen seated on a throne under a royal umbrella, attended by several personages, all three crowned, one holding a bow and a sword, another of a bluish tint, brandishing a hand-fan, and the third with a fly whisk, though armed with a sword. An animal-headed messenger not easily identified as a monkey, is addressing the king and at his feet is what is obviously a monkey with the red face, stroking the king's foot and his foot. Narada, the divine messenger, is seen floating above them with several miniature creatures, perhaps gonas. The background is red ochre, strewn with white flowers”.<sup>16</sup> The animal-headed messenger wears a Jhangiri turban and a Mughal Jama coat. The queen blouse is identical to 18th-century paintings, which have resemblance with the Mughal style of painting found in Odisha in a distinctive colour.

There are also a few motifs paintings which are very popular in Odisha. The motifs like *Navagunjara*, (A mythical animal consisting of several forms of humans and animals) *Gandabhairava* (the forms of a bird with two heads, and four legs in a flying position carrying four elephants), *Gandabherunda* (A mythical bird that plies elephants). *Kamadhenu* (The body of a cow, the head of a woman and the tail of a peacock), antelope with two heads fitted to its neck, *Kandarparath* (The God of love sitting with a flower bow) and *Kamakunjara* (An elephant formed with the composition of women figures) etc. were into Odishan paintings from Mughal paintings earlier it did not appear in Odishan sculpture. Though it is said that all these paintings are religious art, we get secular themes in them. The *Navagunjara* Motif is also traced in the Pahari and Deccani School of paintings.<sup>17</sup> Many scholars of Odisha made the remarks that this motif is purely Odishan origin as its reference available in the Sarala *Mahabharata* which needs further research and substantiation.

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<sup>16</sup> C.L. Fabri, *History of the Art of Orissa*, Orient Longman Ltd., Calcutta, 1974, PP. 195-196.

<sup>17</sup> M. Yamin, *Cultural History of Odisha*, Readworthy Press Corporation, New Delhi, 2021, PP. 173-183.