

Pala Painting

Pala Painting The earliest examples of Bengal painting are the twelve extant miniatures delineated on the palm-leaves of a manuscript of the Buddhist text, *Astasahasrika-prajnaparamita*, dated in the sixth regnal year of the Pala king mahipala I (c 983 AD). This rare manuscript is now in the possession of The Asiatic Society, Calcutta. There are two more painted manuscripts which belong to Mahipala I's reign, but they are later in date. Many more manuscripts with paintings, belonging to the following two centuries, have come to light. Since they were painted in a period when the kings of the Pala dynasty were ruling the region, they are also known as Pala-miniatures. Technically, these miniatures are so well done that it is impossible to believe that they are the earliest expression of the art in Bengal. They represent a mature style that could only have evolved through generations. But, lamentably, since painting is a very fragile medium, no extant specimen of it ascribable to a date earlier than that of the Palas has so far been discovered in Eastern India.

There is, however, a story in the *Vitashokavadana* section of the Buddhist text, *Divyavadana*, indicating that painting was practised in Bengal as early as the third century BC.

According to it, the Nirgranthi-upasakas of Pundravardhana, a city in North Bengal, drew a painting showing Buddhdeva as prostrating before the feet of Nirgrantha (Gosala). For the audacious acts of the Ajivikas of the city, they were totally annihilated by Ashoka. Whatever may be the historical value of the narrative, it suggests the prevalence of the art of painting in Bengal even in the pre-Christian period.

The Pala rule in eastern India, which continued for about four hundred years (c 750-1200 AD), saw the first consolidation of Bengal culture. In this period Bengali genius expressed itself in various creative mediums - architecture, sculpture and painting. Since no painting of any earlier periods has been discovered, and since the practice of miniature persisted throughout the Pala period, and continued in a diluted style even after the fall of the dynasty, Pala painting is considered to be virtually synonymous with early Bengal painting.

The Pala kings were Buddhists, and remarkably liberal in their attitude to other faiths. In the days of the Palas the Mahayana cult of the faith developed its Tantrayana-Vajrayana-Kalachakrayana aspects. The Pala miniatures are in a sense visual expression of these cults.

Surprisingly, even after a thousand of years, quite a number of illustrated Pala manuscripts have survived. This fact itself provides an idea about the strength and productivity of the art during the Pala rule, which is well known for bountiful creation of images in stone and metal. For an estimate of the quantum of painting so far found it would suffice to state that the number of miniatures delineated on dated manuscripts alone comes to three hundred and more. If paintings of undated manuscripts are added the number increases further.

The manuscripts were written and painted on palm-leaf pages. Palm-leaf is fragile, and therefore many of them are now in a brittle state. In comparison with later palm-leaf manuscripts those of the Pala period, however, are better preserved. This is because they were made of the best quality of palm-leaves obtained from a variety of palms known as *Shritada*. The leaves of the *xritada* (palm leaves) are thin and elastic, and therefore less susceptible to breakage. They grow as long as 90 cm in length and 7BD cm in breadth.

They were processed for about a month by being kept under water and then dried up, then made smooth by abrading a conch on them, and cut into size. After holes were perforated for the binding cord, they were written on and painted.

The scribe wrote five to seven lines of the text following the length of the leaves on each page, but left out spaces for painting where necessary. In one page usually three paintings of the dimension of 6 cm x 7 cm were drawn, one placed in the centre and two on the flanks. In some manuscripts only two paintings on the sides have been found.

Painting is a very complicated art. But in comparison with murals the technique of manuscript painting is simple. Usually a background colour was laid before the preliminary drawings, but in some examples the drawings were done directly on the leaf. The figures were then filled up with intended colours. For achieving modelling of forms shades and highlights were applied. Then, and in accordance with the tradition of Indian painting, an outline was given in a shade close to the colour of the figure with a medium brush. Finally, fine outlines were drawn in black or red following the previous lines for modelling.

The colours generally used were yellow, chalk white, indigo blue, black of the lamp-shoot, cinnabar red (*sindura*) and a green prepared by mixing blue and yellow. Most of the colours were tempered by adding a little white. Since the subjects treated were mainly Buddhist gods and goddesses, the painter had to follow the iconographical injunctions of the *Sadhanamala* and other texts. However, they left glimpses of their aesthetic preferences in spaces where trees, architectural, and other forms were painted around the deities as background. Most of the deities have been done in yellow or deep red colour. The backgrounds are also mostly in yellow or red.

In determining the stylistic character of Pala painting, a reference to the account left by the Tibetan historian Taranath is of relevance.

According to him, art reached a high watermark during the rule of two early Pala kings dharmapala (c 781-821 AD) and devapala (c 821-861 AD), when two artists of Varendra or North Bengal, Dhimana and his son Vitapala, attained eminence. They were masters in image making in stone and metal as well as in painting. But in style the son differed from the father. While Dhimana pursued the 'eastern style', Vitapala painted in a style termed as 'middle-country', which meant Magadha or South Bihar in the Buddhist tradition.

Taranath's observation shows that the painting of eastern India of the Pala age had a recognized style with two distinct regional expressions of Varendra and Magadha. But to understand its character it will be necessary to refer to the classical painting of fifth-sixth century India.

Indian art reached its zenith during the days of the Imperial Guptas (c 320-675 AD) and their immediate followers. The murals of the period, as found at Ajanta, Bagh and Badami caves, are marked out as the best examples of Indian classical painting for their technical mastery and aesthetic superiority. The main stylistic characteristics of the classical paintings are the uninterrupted flow of rhythmic line and the fully developed modelling. The latter was achieved by the application of colours in terms of light and shade and the deft manipulation of line. The sculpture and painting of the classical period pursued the same artistic ideals and both emphasized plasticity and linearism. There is reason to believe that Dhimana and Vitapala revived classical art under the Palas, for Taranath records that Dhiman was a follower of the 'Naga' style. One of the centres of Naga power was Mathura in North India, and the city is well known as the epicentre of Indian classical art. The figures of the Pala-miniatures show similar emphasis on sculputesque modelling and rhythmic linearism. In fact, if the tiny miniatures are blown up they will show almost the same features of the classical murals with continuous lines and modelled forms; and for that they are clearly distinguished from the European miniatures which exhibit, among others, broken minute lines. The other significant aspect of the Pala miniature is that they follow artistic ideals similar to those contemporary images made in stone and metal.

Because Pala miniatures were painted over a number of centuries, they did not remain the same in style. Coming from different centres of the Pala Empire and belonging to different centuries, they reveal more than one trend in pictorial composition and representation of forms.

In the evolution of Pala painting at least two distinctive stylistic phases can be clearly marked. The first one includes the paintings of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, as noted in the manuscripts of the reigns of Mahipala I (c 995-1043 AD) and Nayapala (c 1043-1058 AD), while the second phase is represented by those of the reign of ramapala (c 1082-1124 AD) and his successors, that is to say, the late 11th to the end of the 12th centuries. The style of the first phase is found to be closely linked with that of classical Ajanta.

Whether in composition or colour scheme, modelling of forms or rhythmic flowing line, the Pala miniature of this phase emulated the ideals of Ajanta murals, though in slightly diluted form. From the discovery of some fragments of Pala mural paintings in an excavated Buddhist shrine at Nalanda it is now evident that murals were also executed in the period.

In the second phase two different aesthetic visions appear to have flourished simultaneously. The more dominant of the two was that found in the miniatures associated with Ramapala and Govindapala, one of his successors. The miniatures of this trend show, not unlike contemporary sculpture, voluptuous figures, especially in representing female deities, with colours more saturated in character. These characteristics are also manifested in the paintings of a manuscript of Astasahasrika-Prajnaparamita prepared in the 19th regnal year of the Varman King Harivarmadeva (c 1073-1127 AD) of southeast Bangladesh. This manuscript's now preserved at the Varendra Research Museum at Rajshahi. But the paintings of the Panchavingxatisahasrika- Prajnaparamita, completed in the 8th regnal year of the same king, and now in the collection of Baroda Museum in India, represent quite a different style.

The two-dimensionally conceived figures of the manuscript are delineated in flat colours and delicately nervous lines. They show sensitive fingers, angular limbs, and eyes extended beyond their normal proportions, indicating features of the 'medieval style', which first appeared in the wall paintings of the Elora caves and matured in western India in the Jain manuscript paintings from about the twelfth century. Eastern India witnessed the presence of the style in a few copper plate drawings of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Though some of the Pala miniatures show this medieval trend, it was never a dominant style, as in Western India. But two Buddhist manuscripts, both retrieved from Bihar and of as late a period as the fifteenth century, exhibit paintings of the medieval style albeit in a fragile expression.

Most painted manuscripts of the Pala period are of the authentic Mahayanist Buddhist text, Astasahasrika-Prajnaparamita. The other manuscripts with paintings are of the Vajrayanist cult, namely, Pancharaksa, Karandavyuha, Kalachakrayana-tantra, etc. What is extremely interesting is that there is no thematic connection between the texts and their paintings. The paintings are not the illustrations of the texts of the manuscripts. They are, on the contrary, independent of the content of the texts and, as such, autonomous in the selection of their forms. Irrespective of the texts, the subjects treated in paintings are chiefly from the life of the Gautam Buddha, and

depict the events known as his miracles. The eight miracles represented are: (1) Birth at Lumbini garden; (2) Attainment of Bodhihood at Bodhgaya; (3) First sermon at Sarnath; (4) Passing away at Kushinagara; (5) Miracle at Shravasti; (6) Descent from heaven at Sankishya; (7) Suppression of the elephant Nalagiri at Rajagriha; and (8) Acceptance of honey from a monkey at Vaishali.

Of these, the first four are recognised as major or more important miracles, representing the cardinal events of the Master's life. Since the paintings belong to a period when the Vajrayana-Tantrayana cult was a dominant force of Buddhism, especially in Eastern India, the depiction of the Tantric-Buddhist gods and goddesses are also found profusely in the miniatures of the time. More popular among the deities painted were Prajna-paramita, Tara, Lokanatha, Maitreya, Vajrapani, Padmapani, Vasudhara, Mahakala, Kurukulla, Chunda, Vajrasattva and Manjushri.

A relevant question is: who patronized the preparation of the painted manuscripts, and why? It is not difficult to answer the first question, as some light on it is thrown by the dedicatory verses of the manuscripts known as Dana-puspika. The manuscripts were prepared under the patronage and close supervision of Buddhist monks, who are mentioned as Sthavira, Upasaka and Bhiksu. In some texts Buddhist followers such as a feudal lord and high state officials are mentioned as donors. The purpose of the patronage was to gain virtue, not only for himself, but also for parents, teachers and preceptors.

Apart from this immediate reason, a deeper source of inspiration for this virtuous work can be noted in the text of the Prajnaparamita itself. The theology preached by the text is found to glorify the nature of the perfect knowledge and its proper application for mankind as well as all living beings. For this liberal humanist viewpoint the Prajnaparamita text was recited in almost all religious functions of Bengali Buddhists. The prestige of the text became so enormous that the votaries of Buddhism worshipped its manuscripts. In fact, many of the Astasahasrika-Prajnaparamita texts bear the marks of sandal paste and incense. Moreover, in the text it has been repeatedly mentioned that copying of the text is itself a pious act. A terracotta plaque recently discovered from a monastic site at Jagjivanpur (Malda, West Bengal), shows a manuscript, most likely of the Prajnaparamita, placed on a lotus as an object of worship. The representation of Tantric Buddhist deities in miniature in the text is possibly another reason of the paramount position held by it.

Bengal was the most powerful centre of Mahayana Buddhism in India from the 8th to 12th century AD; and from here the faith spread to different countries - Nepal and Tibet in the north and Myanmar and Thailand in the east. Along with the monks the manuscripts also went to these places resulting in the wide dissemination of the Pala style of painting. In the late 12th and early 13th century, many Buddhists migrated to neighbouring countries with manuscripts and small bronze images. In the following centuries the Pala art style further developed in those foreign lands. In fact, to have a total view of the Pala miniature style it is essential to take into consideration the painted manuscripts of Nepal.