



Nawalgarh Haveli Paintings: a Theme Depended on the Partial Avatars

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ABSTRACT

Wall painting as an art genre enjoyed great popularity in India starting in the 2nd century B.C., but attaining its pinnacle only in the 6th century A.D., with the splending paintings of Ajanta and then others. In the 16-17th centuries they underwent a vigorous revival and played an important role in the decoration of the royal palaces, in the homes of the noble and rich, in temples and cenotaphs. Unfortunately the inveterate Indian custom of periodically 'renovating' the decoration of homes and temples by repainting them or drastically erasing parts of them is leading to the destruction of important works of art from the past. The aim of the present book is also to document the serious damage caused to this Indian artistic heritage. The earliest examples of Indian painting, that we find evidence of, are on the walls of some of the caves in the Kaimur Range of Central India, Vindhya Hills and some places in Uttar Pradesh. Nawalgarh is a town in Jhunjhunu district of Indian state Rajasthan. It is part of the Shekhawati region and is midway between Jhunjhunu and Sikar. Nawalgarh is famous for its fresco and havelis and considered as Golden City of Rajasthan. It is also the motherland of some great business families of India. The theme of the wall painting or frescoes decorating the beautiful "havelis" of Shekhawati region has changed over a period of time. In the earlier days at the time of its inception, mythology dominated the themes of frescoes, which shows the local legends, animal, portraits, hunting and wrestling. But a century later there was a change in the theme of the paintings to reflect the British influence in Indian culture. The traditional subjects were replaced by cars, trains, balloons, telephones, gramophones, men in suits hunting and portraits of haveli owners immaculately dressed.

KEYWORDS : Wall paintings, Nawalgarh, Themes, Havelis, Frescoes, Merchant class.

Introduction:

Shekhawati has ever marked its presence on the national and international arena throughout trade and industry. However, during past few decades it has well registered its name with the world tourism too. Never would it attract the foreign visitors in so vast numbers as it has been attracting during past three decades. This part of the northeast Rajasthan about 100 to 200 kilometers north of Jaipur falling within the Sikar, Jhunjhunu and Churu districts has so far had an image of a sandy desert. The grand majestic forts, temples, palatial mansions or havelis. Nevertheless, they remained unnoticed. For, they remained unexposed to the eyes of the ruling Thikanas (small princely states), notably of Madawa, Dundlod, Fatehpur, and Nawalgarh did feel an urge to present these hidden treasures of art and culture before the eyes of the world community. Nawalgarh is a heritage city in Shekhawati region, 40 Km. from Jhunjunu and 27 km. from Sikar and 132 km. from Jaipur.

There are about 100 havelis in Nawalgarh with beautiful paintings and frescoes on walls. The havelis began to come in to existence after the last quarter of the eighteenth century. They are creations of the rich merchants built between 1780 to 1900-35. The beautiful paintings and frescos on the wall of havelis do not only feast the eyes of the visitors, but they also mirror the contemporary Shekhawati life, the ways, the customs, the faiths and beliefs of the people, and also the craftsmanship of the unlettered artists. Hear visitors come in large numbers from various countries of Europe such as England, France, Germany and Italy. The foreigners see paintings but they do not sufficiently understand the thematic aspects of the subjects presented. Perhaps the escorting guides also do not or cannot give adequate information. I have tried to explain the thematic aspects as are required by a common viewer.

Majority of the paintings presents the religious and spiritual aspects of life. They present either gods or their incarnations, or the holy sages and their lives as given in the Holy Scriptures. However, a sizeable portion of them presents other aspects of life too. Man lives in a civilized society and endeavors of life. He cannot feel contented, directing his energies towards dharma (a righteous life) and moksha (liberation from birth and death) alone. As he lives in the world and for the world, it is only natural for him to pursue arth (wealth) and kaama (carnal pleasures) too.

The Indian scriptures have divided the historically recorded time into four *Yugas* (long ages). Chronologically they are: the *Satya Yuga*; the *Treta Yuga*; the *Dwapar Yuga* and the *kali Yuga* (the current one). Thousands of years ago, in the second *Yuga* i.e. the *Treta*

yuga, Dashrath, the king of Ayodhya (in the present province of Uttar Pradesh) had grown too old to run the affairs of the vast empire. He needed an able heir to relieve him. Though he had three queens, they all were childless. They could bear him no son to succeed him as his heir. Therefore, the kingdom was going to be heirless. The king approached the family *guru maharishi* Vashisth and urged upon him to find some remedy to the problem. The *maharishi* advised him to perform a *putreshti Yajna* (a yajna for having a son). On *guru's* advice, the king invited one more *rishi*, called Shringi, to conducted and at the end of it, the *kheer* (the sacred offering of the *Yajna*) was given to the three queens. They received and consumed it. In course of time, the three queens were blessed with four sons. Ram was born to the eldest, Kaushalya; Bharat to Kaikeyi; and the two sons Lakshman and Shtrughna were born to the youngest, Sumitra. Ram is considered one of the twenty-four avatars of lord Vishnu. He came and shone as a glorious king and an ideal ruler over the throne of Ayodhya. Apart from this, also one more reason is stated behind his incarnation. The gods were greatly oppressed by Ravan, the contemporary king of Lanka and the grandson of Pulistya (once the ruling king of Lanka). Ravan developed hatred and became enemy of all: the *Brahmins*, the *rishis*, the gods and even to the gentle and righteous public. He stopped the *rishis* from conducting *Yajnas*. He burnt and turned into ashes their habitats and the forests. His followers began to oppress and kill the sages. Even Lord Indra, the king of gods, felt defeated and helpless. No longer, mother earth was able to suffer his tortures; Lord Ram took birth from the womb of Kaushalya.

1. Shri Sanakaadi Avatara (as Sanak and others):

Before the creation of this universe, Lord Brahma undertook to the course of self-mortification with the desire of creating words. Lord Vishnu, pleased with the devotion of Brahma, assumed the forms of four sages or hermits-Sanak, Sanandan, Sanatan, and Santkumar. The prefix 'san' in all the four is synonymous to 'tap' (self-mortification) which Brahma had undertaken to satisfy the Lord. Throughout, they lived as hermits, committed to devotion and meditation. They were self-satisfied and absolutely detached from the world and the worldly attractions. They were thorough ascetics and always looked young as boys. Hence, they did not accomplish Brahma's wish of creation.

Once, they visited Vaikuntha, the abode of Lord Vishnu. Inspired by the desire of the Lord's *darshan*, they went inside it. They had already crossed six courts of the palace. When they were going to cross the seventh one, Jaya and Vijaya, two sentinels of Vishnu stopped them. Considering the unclad young sages some begging urchins, first they mocked and jeered at them. Then, harshly scolding them, the sentinels blocked their entry. The sages could not get the Lord's *darshan*.

Quite annoyed, they cursed Jaya and Vijaya that they would soon be deprived of Vaikuntha and take birth thrice as demons in future. Accordingly, they were born as demons consecutively for three lives. First, they were born as Hiranyakashipu and Hiranyaksha. Then, as Ravana and Kumbhakarna, and lastly, as Shishupal and Dantavakra.

When Vishnu came to know of his councillors' misconduct with the sages, he appeared with Lakshmi and blessed them with his *darshan*. Though, always they looked as adolescent immature boys, in fact, they were great scholars and experts at the interpretation of religious courses and scriptures. They blessed king Prithu and many others with sound knowledge of the scriptures. Their major revelations and teachings were: there exists no eye like the eye of knowledge, no path like the path of truthfulness, no sorrow like bondage in attachment and any joy and comfort as in giving to others. Always keep yourself away from the sinful acts, perform but good deeds, have discourse or intercourse but with the great and pious souls; and follow the righteous conduct. These are the only means of soul's progress and salvation. So they said and taught.

2. Varah Avatara (Incarnation as a Boar):

Maharishi Kashyap offered oblations of *kheer* (a sweet dish of milk, rice and dry fruits) into the *yajna* pyre. Now since the sun had set, he sat down for meditation. His wife Diti struck with the desire of conception approached him and urged him for sexual copulation. The sage, feeling disinclined, refused her for it. He reasoned that it was not the proper time for copulation. However, she was too earnest at her request. Hence, the sage had to bow to her urge. Taking her at a lonely place, he copulated and impregnated her. He then cleansed the body and sat again in meditation.

His meditation and the evening rituals were over. He came back in the hut and found Diti trembling in fear. She was frantically praying for a complete protection and growth of the fetus. Kashyap, when saw her in such a state, explained to her the reason behind it. He said that she had committed a four-fold sin. Firstly, she was mad in lust and not in the proper mind and mood at the time of conception. Secondly, the time of conception was wrong (midnight hours are considered the most appropriate and favorable time for copulating and it was dusk). Thirdly, she had conceived against his wishes. Fourthly, she had discarded the gods proper. Hence, she would bear two sons but they would be cruel and wicked. Mother earth herself along with her great holy souls would be oppressed by their cruel acts. God Himself would have to take *avatara* to annihilate them and liberate the earth from their oppression.

Knowing of the death of her sons at the hands of God himself, Diti felt somewhat consoled. She also felt happy at the idea that God would take *avatara* for the sake of her sons. Nevertheless, thinking of the oppression of the earth and gods by her unborn sons, she kept in her womb for a hundred years. The babies in the womb were so lustrious. Their radiance eclipsed sun and other stars and everywhere there was the darkness. The fetus was increasing day by day. After hundred years, Diti gave birth to twins. As soon as they were born, the earth and the mountains trembled, the cosmos turned dark and black; and there were various kinds of natural disasters everywhere. The boys were given the names Hiranyakashipu and Hiranyaksha. Gradually, they grew up. Once, Hiranyaksha thought that the humans might perform yajnas on the earth for the good of gods. If they did so, that would increase the valour and strength of gods. Therefore, he carried the earth under ocean and hid it there, leaving no place for the living of humankind. Lord Brahma was at prayer of God for the expansion of his creation. Suddenly, his body split into two parts. From one side of the body appeared man and from the other the woman. He named them Manu and Shatroopa respectively. He made them husband and wife and blessed them that their progenies would be called 'humans'. Manu and Shatroopa asked Brahma where they should live as the earth had already been stolen and there was no place to live on. Brahma began to think of the way the earth could be brought back from under the ocean and restored at its proper place. He invoked the help of Vishnu for it. Suddenly, a white piglet, small as a thumb, appeared from the nucleus of the lotus. As Brahma was viewing it in amazement; it suddenly grew bigger like an elephant. Brahma immediately concluded that it was playing various kinds of pranks like an elephant. First, he jumped up into the air with his tail raised. Then he began to scatter and disperse clouds with his trotters.

He had a strong body, stiff hair, white tusks, and bright eyes. With the nostrils, he smelled earth here and there to find it. Then he entered the ocean and ripping its water, reached deep down the bottom. There, he saw the earth. The earth, seeing God himself present before her, paid homage to Him. The lord in the form of boar then lifted the earth on to his snout and came out of the water. When Hiranyaksha saw it, he rushed at Him. Shouting at the Lord for fight. A tough battle took place between them. Finally, God in the form of boar killed Hiranyaksha and granted him eternal peace. After killing Hiranyaksha, He renounced the form of the boar and acquired his original form again.

3. Devrishi Narad Avatara:

Naradji is the incarnation of God's heart and mind. Whatever God wishes to do or perform, the omniscient Narad proclaims it in advance. He has a fair complexion and wears a long tuft of hair on the backside of his head. In his hand, he carries a *veena* (lute) that he got from Vishnu. He is well versed in the knowledge of *vedas*. He is a great astrologer, a musician and a scholar of various subjects. He is honored and worshipped by gods. He knows all of the past, the present, and the future. He is never idle. He always keeps moving from place to place over all the *lokaas* (cosmic worlds), singing hallelujahs and glory of god. Narad, through his sermons, taught the significance of *bhakti* (devotion) to Hiranyakashipu's wife Kayadhu and turned the child (Pralhad) a great devotee of God even when he was in his mother's womb. Same he did with Dhruva, when he (dhruva) was discarded and sent into exile by his father. In addition, he changed the course of life of the ten thousand sons of Daksha. Turning them away from the worldliness, he set them on the path of *bhakti* (devotion). When *maharishi* Vyasa was writing the great epic *Mahabharata*, Narad advised him that his text was inferior, as it contained no glory of God. Therefore, he (vyasa) either should rewrite it or should improve on it. Vyasa followed his advice and improved the work accordingly. Narad had rightly predicted that the kingdom of the Kauravas would soon perish on account of the sins and crimes of Duryodhan. The list of his benign acts is too long. In short, gentle-hearted Narad is alone among the pantheon of gods who enjoys the honor and faith of all. The gods too consider him their true well-wisher.

4. Matsya Avatara (Incarnation as a Fish):

Once, there lived a king, named Satyavrata. He was brave and virtuous to the core. Always, he was ready to forgive and indifferent to sorrow and happiness. In course of time, he grew tired of the state affairs and transferred his power and kingdom to his son. He himself proceeded into the jungle for *tapasya* (a penance undertaken with austerity and asceticism for salvation). When ten thousand years had passed, one day Lord Brahma appeared before him and asked him to seek any favour of him. The king said, "My Lord! Give me the power and ability to save the world and life on earth at the time of the final deluge." The Lord granted him the boon and disappeared. One morning, the king took his bath into a river. After bath, he took some water of the river into palm for offering it to the Lord. A small fish had come with water into the palm. He threw it back into the river. The fish said to the king, "O king! You know well that there live wild and violent creatures into the river. They kill and eat up the helpless smaller ones. And yet you have thrown me back into water?" The king took the fish back and put safely into his *kamandala* (a round long water container usually made of a pumpkin and used by the Indian sages). Just in one night, the creature grew too large to be contained into the bowl. The king then left it a pitcher. The same happened in the pitcher too. Then the king left it into a pond. When it grew larger than the size of the pond, the king had to leave it again into the ocean. Nevertheless, the king was amazed and confounded at the magical tricks of the creature. He concluded that it must be the Lord Himself. Therefore, the king asked Him why he had assumed the form of a fish.

The Lord in the form of a fish said to the king, "On the seventh day hence, the whole world will drown into the deluge, and there shall be water everywhere. Under my command then, a boat will come unto you. You should board it along with the seven *rishis* and carry all kinds of seeds, herbs and the animal offspring safely with yourself. You should keep moving on the ocean without any burden. However, there would be utter darkness there, but you shall receive light from the *rishis*. The boat will be tossing into the Turbulent Ocean. Just then, I will come unto you. You should tie the boat to my horn with the serpent Vasuki. I will keep you and the *rishi* safe from all harm for

one night of Lord Brahma." (One night of Brahma is considered to be of millions of years on the earth). Having said this, the fish (Lord) disappeared. On the seventh day, things happened exactly as the Lord had foretold them. King Satyavrata followed the course as he had been advised by the Lord. God not only saved the king at the time of deluge, also He imparted him the deep knowledge, which in the future time recorded and came before public in the form of *Matsyapurana*.

5. Dhanvantari Avatara:

The churning of the ocean was on. During the process, about a dozen objects, not existing on the earth so far, such as, *Halaahal* (poison), *Kaamdhenu* (a cow), *Airavat* (an elephant), *Uchchaishrava* (a horse), *Apsaras*, *Kaustabh mani* (a diamond), *Vaaruni Shankha* (a conch), *Kalpavriksha* (a tree), *Chandrama* (the moon), *Lakshmi* and *Kadlivriksha* (a banana tree) had already appeared. Nectar, for which they were churning the ocean, was yet to appear. So the gods and the demons were still engaged at the work. In the mean time, Lord Dhanvantari also appeared from ocean, taking a pot of nectar in his hand. Since he was part of the Lord Himself, he resembled Vishnu with a bright and lustrous form. The gods and the demons had already extracted nectar from the ocean. The work of its distribution among them was also over. Then, Lord Indra requested Dhanvantari to act as the physician of gods. He accepted the offer and began to live in Amravati (Indra's capital). In course of time, the humans on the earth suffered from various maladies. Indra again requested him to go and treat them, restoring them a good health. He then came on the earth as Divodasa, the king of Kashi (in the present province of Uttar Pradesh). He is known by several names as, *Adidev*, *Amaravar*, *Amrityoni*, and *Abz*. Since he had appeared on the earth for the good of people on thirteenth of the *Kartika* (Hindu month, falling in October-November), this day is celebrated as his birthday. People worship him as the god of health and wealth.

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