Research Paper History

Nawalgarh Haveli Paintings: A Theme Depended on Ramayan

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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. Unfornmately 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 havili 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 contended, 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 Yug*; 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 avataras 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.

Important characters and events related to His Life:

1. Maharishi Vishwamitra:

The four princes had already crossed the threshold of boyhood. They turned into fully grown up youths, bubbling with power and strength. The family *guru* Vashistha had trained them very well in all arts, including the arts and skills of war and fighting. One day, *maharishi* Vishwamitra happened to come to Ayodhya. He used to live in an *ashrama* (hermitage). The demons used to create disturbances in his *yajnas, and* also on important occasions. Hence, he needed the help of the princes Ram and Lakshman to protect his *yajna* from the demon attacks. The father, Dashrath could not ignore the *rishi's* request. He sent his sons with the *rishi*, though somewhat hesitatingly, as they were too young to deal with the mighty demons. The princes gladly accepted the challenge and escorted the *rishi* to his *ashrama.* On their way to the *ashrama,* they met several demons. The demons they met were Tarka, she-demons; Sibahu and his brother Marich. They successfully fought with the demons and killed them, ensuring peace and relief to Vishwamitra.

2. King Janak and his Daughter Sita:

Janak was the king of Videha. Mithila (also Janakpur) was the capital of the kingdom. The palace was not too far from *maharishi* Vishwamitra's *ashrama.* Janak had a daughter named Sita. Also, she is called Vaidehi as she was the daughter of the king of Videha. She was not a human born. The story goes that there was a pitcher buried underneath the earth.King Janak was ploughing the field and pot got excavated. Curiously enough, Janak removed the lid of the pot and he found a girl inside it. He took the girl to his home and adopted her as his daughter. He brought her up with due care and affection. Now, since she came of age, the king decided to find a suitable groom for her. For this, he announced and organized a *swayamvar. Swayamvar* used to be a king of open contest, usually organized by a king for choosing a suitable husband for his daughter. He would invite the deserving princes. The king would set a challenging task as the qualifying condition. The girl would marry him who would qualify at the test by performing the given task successfully. Janak invited *maharishi* Vishwamitra with Ram and Lakshman. Vishwamitra accepted Janak's invitation and taking the princes with him, left for Janakpur. First, the princes were taken around the city. They found the city quite attractive as it had attractive buildings, wide and straight roads; and green and beautiful gardens. As the princes were taking a round in the king's garden, Sita happened to be there with her attendants and female friends. Suddenly, their eyes fell on to each other and they exchanged glances. At once, they felt attracted and developed liking for one another. Finally, the day of the *swayamvar* came. Princes in large numbers from far off places did assemble. They were to try their hands at the test king Janak had set for his daughter's hand. The test involved a condition. The condition was: Sita will marry him who will break Pinaak, Lord Shiva's great bow into pieces. The king's heralds announced it and the contest began. One after another, the princes were trying their hands. Many of them could not even lift the bow up, not to say of breaking it. They helplessly sat down. Eventually, Prince Ram picked it up, broke it into two pieces, and became entitled for Sita's hand. Ravan had also participated in the competition but he failed. He could not even lift up the bow, not to say of breaking it. One more *rishi,* Parashuram was also present there. Though he was a *rishi*, he was a brave fighter too. He had, as is said, defeated noted *kshatriya* kings several times at various wars. The *rishi* was a staunch devotee of Lord Shiva. So when the bow of Shiva was broken, Parashuram, taking it to be his Lord's insult, became furious at Ram. However, Ram cooled the *rishi's* ire through his sweet and soft words. King Janak now sent Dashrath the message of Ram's success and the consequent marriage of Sita to him. Also, he sent him a proposal. The proposal was that of the king Dashrath's other sons. Dashrath accepted it and thus, his four sons got married to four daughters of Janak.

3. Decision of Ram's Coronation and His Exile:

King Dashrath had grown old. He was feeling it quite difficult to run the affairs of the state. Therefore, he thought and decided to shift the sceptre of power into someone else's hands. He consulted his courtiers over the matter. With one voice, the courtiers and the relatives suggested Ram to be his heir apparent. Having due consultations with the family *guru,* Dashrath fixed the time and the day for Ram's coronation. However, suddenly, a crisis cropped up. Once, Queen Kaikeyi had done some favour to Dashrath. The king was highly pleased with her. He told her to ask for some special favour of him. He promised that he would grant it. Kaikeyi was much wise. Asking for nothing instantly, she kept her right reserved for the future use. Now since she knew that Kaushalya's son Ram was going to be the heir to the throne, she approached Dashrath and reminded him of his promise. The king allowed her to ask for the thing she liked. She then asked the king that her son, Bharat be made the king of Ayodhya and Ram be sent into exile for fourteen years. Her words came like bolt from the blue on the king's head. He well realized the disastrous consequences of her wish. He told her not to make such hard wish but a soft one that he could easily fulfill. The queen, despite his continuous pleadings, remained unmoved. Turning harder, she asked him either to fulfill her wish or should face the ignominy of breaking his promise. He had to bent before her. Feeling forced, he declared Bharat to be his heir and decided to send Ram into exile. Ram, keeping with the decision of the father, took permission from him and left for the forest. His wife Sita and younger brother Lakshman too accompanied him. Dashrath, not bearing the blow of the son's separation, died in sorrow. Here, one more story goes. It is said that Dashrath's sepration from the son and his subsequent death took place under a curse. Once Shrawan Kumar, his sister's son was taking his blind parents on a pilgrimage. While passing through the forest, they felt thirsty. Shrawan Kumar, leaving them under a tree, went to fetch water from the nearby pond. He dipped the pot into the water, which made a gurgling sound. King Dashrath was passing by the side as he was there in the forest on the hunting mission. On hearing the gurgling sound of the water pot, he thought that it must be some deer, drinking water from the pond. Therefore, he shot an arrow, which struck deep into Shrawan Kumar's heart. He died on the spot. When the blind parents knew it, they felt extremely sorrowful. For, since he was gone, their hopes of life were also gone. So, they cursed the king that he would also suffer his son's separation and die in sorrow, like them. Bharat was a loyal and devoted brother. A few days after Ram had left; he went to search for him. After long search, he found Ram in the forest. He requested him to return to Ayodhya and take charge of the throne. He himself would like to work under his guidance. However, Ram refused to go back to Ayodhya.For, he was not to belie the promise that his father had made to his step- mother. Bharat came back without Ram. He ruled over the kingdom for fourteen years though, he never sat on the throne. Instead, he placed Ram's *khadau* (wooden chappals) as his representatives on it and conducted the business of the state in his name.

4. Ram in the Forest:

Ram, Sita and Lakshman moved ahead. They reached the bank of the holy river Ganga. The river was deep and wide and they were to cross it. For it, they needed the service of a boatman. One, named Kewat was there. Ram asked him to take them across the river. But the old man refused, pleading that the touch of his feet would turn his boat into a living woman as it did to Ahilya, the wife of the sage Goutam. There is an intresting story about it. Ahilya, the *rishi's* wife had a secret affair with the bright and beautiful god, Moon. One day, the *rishi* noticed them in objectionable circumstances. For his sacrilegious act, he cursed Moon to get blemished with a dark blot on his body and losing his beauty thereby (Indians still believe that Moon has a dark blot on its body for this reason). To his wife, he gave the cruse that she be turned into a stone statue. Miraculously, she did. When Lord Ram was passing through the forest, the statue got touched to his feet and it became again alive into a woman! In fact, Kewat's refusal was just his pretension. In reality, he wanted to serve the Lord. He made the pretension so that he could get an opportunity

to wash the Lord's feet and get His blessings, the greatest reward one could aspire for. He succeeded in that, as the king and merciful Lord granted his request of washing His feet before boarding the boat. After crossing the river, they kept on wandering from place to place across various forests for a long time. During this period, they visited many *rishis,* notably *maharishi* Atri and Agastya at their *ashramas.* They encountered and killed many demons as they continuously created troubles in the forests. They made it difficult for the *rishis* to live peacefully and perform *yajnas.* Finally, they reached *Panchvati* (a garden with cottages) in the *Dandak* forest. They stayed there for some time.

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