

## A Dhyāna-Citra on Ivory from Banaras

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The history of Indian miniature painting on ivory (*hāthīdanta*) covers roughly the whole of the nineteenth and the opening quarter of the twentieth century C.E. In spite of the fact that the ancient Indians knew the art of ivory carving and even painted over the carved ivories, portraits from life or after the parent versions in oil or watercolour, icons, views of historic monuments were fashioned on small ivory panels much under the direct influence of British miniaturists visiting native courts.<sup>1</sup> Even prior to the visit of British miniaturists Indian painters certainly had a chance to see examples of portraits on ivory, and were commissioned to make replicas or touch up a few such pieces. Arrival of a number of accomplished British miniaturists quickened the Indianization of this exclusive genre. Martha Isaacs (1778-82), the first to arrive, was followed by Ozias Humphrey (July 1785-March 1787), John Smart (September 1785-April 1795) and George Chinnery (December 1802-July 1825). Several lesser known artists such as Samuel Andrews (1791-1807) and Charles Shirreff (January 1797-January 1809) and a few professional women miniaturists who were lured to India continued to paint portraits, diminutive in size, with delicate colour stippling. This exotic idiom, however, could never become a major manifestation in the land where it was transplanted and nurtured with great care. There were certain obvious controlling factors like the size, superb command over the technique and the intimate connoisseurly response on the part of the patron which conjoinedly made miniatures on ivory a collector's item to be treasured with great care. These delicate objects of art acquired an aesthetic of its own, an intimacy rooted in elegantly worked up details and a certain eloquence not possible in big-sized watercolours or oils, and not always even in miniatures done on *vaslī* (pasteboard made of handmade papers) with opaque watercolour. From C. 1840 the art of photography swept through the country. A demand for intimate and portable likenesses was met and the photograph offered less expensive, more accurate and earthly real images. Miniatures on ivory gradually ceased to continue as personal jewels and

became part of a toy picture gallery. By late nineteenth century C.E. Indian ivory painters catered essentially to the tourists visiting Delhi, Agra and Sikri, producing fanciful *bijouterie* in the form of highly finished portrait series of Grand Moguls and sets of architectural views.<sup>2</sup>

One major groups of Indian painted ivories consisted of portraits. To another cluster may be placed architectural views. Iconic representations belong to yet another type. Thematic paintings are rare yet they justify a subdivision of the latter. Photographs printed by the "Carbon transfer method" on ivory plaques were enhanced with colour stippling and a limited number of surviving specimens form an interesting category.<sup>3</sup> Playing cards or *ganjifā*, circular as also rectangular, were also made out of ivory and some of the sets show splendid painted details, not always done in the transparent but in vibrant opaque tempera, which were lacquered or varnished<sup>4</sup>. The major centres for the creation of these little objects of art were Murshidabad, Patna, Banaras, Lucknow, Agra, Delhi, Lahore, Amritsar, Jaipur, Udaipur, Mysore, Trichinopoly and Tanjavur.

Painting on ivory demanded draughtsmanly perfection over the drawing and subtle observation of the nuances of chiaroscuro. At the same time it was expected that an ivory painter must have a discriminating knowledge regarding the nature of the transparent tinting hues (*ḍakī raṅga*) as also of the opaque body colours (*gad raṅga*). Panels of approximately one tenth or two tenths of an inch in thickness cut laterally from a "green ivory" tusk were considered to be ideal for painting.<sup>5</sup> To obtain a bigger format often two panels were joined together with the help of grooves. In order to achieve a smooth surface appropriate for painting the panels were rubbed on an even slab of stone and then an overall polish was given with cuttle-bone (*samudra-phena*) to remove scratches and deeper marks of saw-teeth.<sup>6</sup> Drawing was done with *likti* or *āb-raṅga*<sup>7</sup> directly on the ivory surface or with the help of outline traced from *carbā*<sup>8</sup> or tracing. The British miniaturists and their Indian disciples both understood the possibilities of the luminous quality of the surface of the support hence the white priming (*astara*) was found superfluous. With a jeweller's exquisiteness in detailing they applied thin colours with "enamelled care". Pigments were tempered with gum arabic and a weak solution of soap berry (*rīthā, sapindaceae*). Once the thin coats of paint applied to different parts of the drawing dried up each part was enlivened with *pardāza* (minute stippling).<sup>9</sup> *Ābdārī* or "glossing" certain parts like the oiled hair,

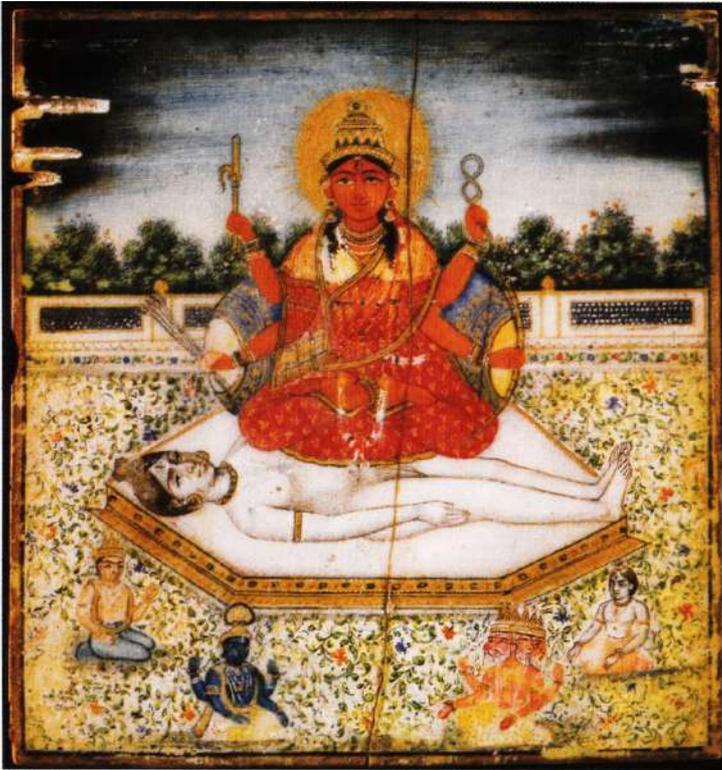
shiny silken drapery or transparent wimple was done by applying a weak solution of gum arabic after the *pardāza*. Such effects, however, stood out from the rest of the painted surface but colour flaked out from such parts after a certain period. The use of powdered gold (*halkārī sonā*)<sup>10</sup> was aimed at enhancing the gold jewellery, brocades with metallic yarn, nimbus, etc. Unlike the raised effect added to the delineation of pearl jewellery in miniatures on *vasli* it was depicted comparatively flat yet full in its effect of relief, a fine-tipped brush (*dāna denekī qalama*) being used exclusively for the purpose.

Much famed for its *dantakāra vīthi* or "ivory - workers' *bāzāra*" as mentioned in *Silvanāga Jātaka* - the story of the good elephant and the ungrateful forester<sup>11</sup>, Banaras continued as a centre of ivory carving till early twentieth century. "Painting on ivory", opined Mildred Archer, "was not practised on a wide scale in Benaras; painting on mica was far more popular".<sup>12</sup> Belonging to the family of hereditary painters of Murshidabad, Dallu Lal (C. 1790 - C. 1860) migrated from Patna-Danapur to Banaras in C. 1815 and was followed by Kamalpati Lal (C. 1760 - C. 1838) who owned "a flourishing shop which produced paintings of the Patna type on both paper and mica, depicting occupations, costumes, festivals and transport".<sup>13</sup> His eldest son Chuni Lal (C. 1820 - 1908 CE) had proficiency in ivory painting, particularly in the field of iconic pictures done "in gold and colours in the style of manuscript illumination".<sup>14</sup> They were priced "Rs. 20 to Rs. 50 a piece" and a set of twelve such pictures were sent to "the Calcutta International Exhibition 1883), valued at Rs. 515".<sup>15</sup> Since none of those images have been published we fail to have any concrete idea about the style of those iconic paintings of Patna School. However, some nineteenth-century CE, iconic paintings of *devi* theme on paper from Chapra<sup>16</sup>, a European centre for agriculture north of the Ganges from Patna where a branch of Murshidabad or Patna painter families migrated towards late eighteenth century<sup>17</sup>, do show the prevailing trend of this popular category. Banaras Mahārājās, Udit Narain Singh (r. 1795 - 1835 CE)<sup>18</sup> and Isvari Narain Singh (r. 1835 - 89 CE) generously patronized the Patna artists, essentially for their European-influenced naturalistic standards. Another group of local painters belonging to Ustad Gval Sikkhi *gharānā* (lineage) with their insight into late-Mughal and localized Rajasthani idiom showed remarkable deftness in the area of ivory painting.<sup>19</sup> Sikkhi's grandson Ustad Mulchand (locally called Ustad Mula

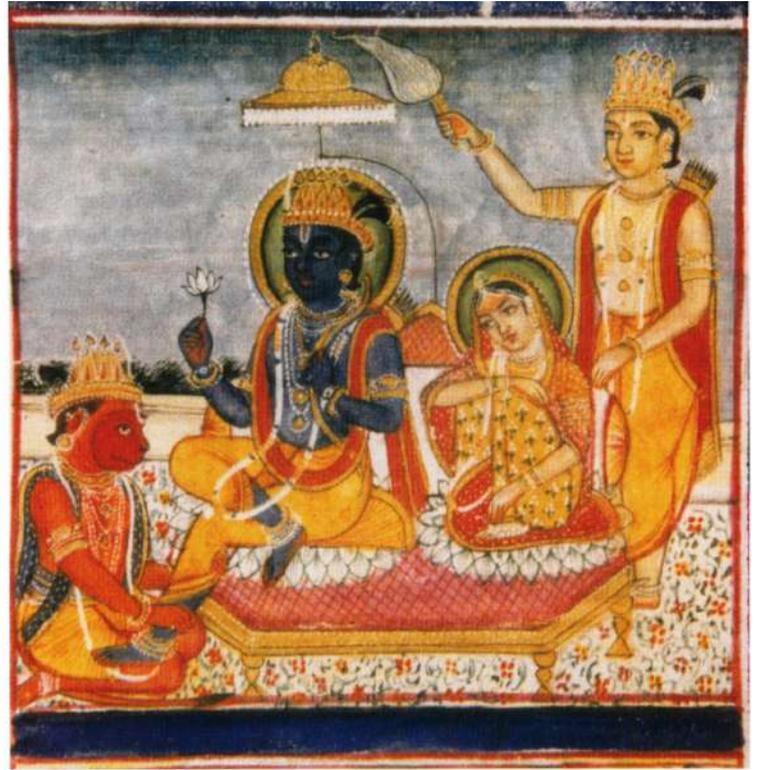
or Musavvar Mularam, active C. 1890 - 1900 CE) mastered the technique as may be noticed in his smoothly modelled portrait of Col. Matvar Singh<sup>20</sup>.

Datable to C. 1880 CE, this *dhyāna-citra* of Ṣoḍaṣī or Tripurasundariī or Śrīvidyā (fig. 1) from Jñāna-Pravāha Collection was commissioned to Mulchand's family guild by an aristocrat for his private shrine in Banaras. Being a prime centre of Hindu pilgrimage, Banaras attracted devotees from faraway places and majority of them carried back home miniature metal idols as also painted icons for propitiation<sup>21</sup>. There was also a constant local demand for *dhyāna-citra* keeping the local artists busy with production. "With his unmatched fund of traditional knowledge of *dhyānas* (iconographical formulae) of Hindu deities", as recorded by Prof. Ananda Krishna, "Ustad Moola had scarcely a competitor in this field."<sup>22</sup> Mulchand expressed in a variety of styles and up to the years (c. 1880-85) when he worked as a litho artist<sup>23</sup> his execution showed remarkable linear clarity, focused on charming tiny details. In late 1870s he painted a Mahāvidyā (great revelations or manifestations of Devī) series on oval ivory plaques for Ramnath ji Vyasa of Pitambarā temple in Banaras. The iconography of this grand Devī series continued in Mulchand's family guild as the ultimate prototype. The Jñāna-Pravāha specimen<sup>24</sup>, painted almost a decade later, was based on the former Mahāvidyā series yet one would notice the inclusion of quite a few interesting pictorial elements added to the pristine iconic repertoire.

Mahāvidyās "Subdue, defeat, or terrify the enemies of the adept or devotee who invokes them".<sup>25</sup> This particular small little ivory has the depiction of Ṣoḍaṣī according to a certain hymnal invocation as a girl of sixteen, her complexion brilliant red like the solar orb at the dawn. Astride the prone body of Śiva lying on a hexagonal platform throne with Indra, Viṣṇu, Brahmā and Rudra as four legs, the goddess holds goad (*aṅkuśa*) in her upper right hand, noose (*pāśa*) in her upper left hand, arrows (*śara*) in her lower right hand and bow (*cāpa*) in her lower left hand. Her three-eyed face, was shown in the frontal view (*do caśma*), set against a radiating golden nimbus. She wears a *kirīṭa-mukuṭa*, pearl-studded necklace and a *vanamālā* (flower garland), hidden partially under the transparent folds<sup>26</sup> of a brocaded *sārī*. Due to *ābḍārī* the black curly strands of the hair falling on the right shoulder flaked out. Śiva's face in three-quarter view (*paune-do cāśma*) was finished with *likti*, warm grey stippling adding roundness to the facial features and to the matted locks secured in a top-knot. The cylindrical bolster painted with



**15.1:** Ustad Mulchand's family guild, *Şoḍaşi*, c.1880 CE, Jñāna-Pravāha Collection, Acc. No. 2002.1



**15.2:** Ustad Mulchand, *Rāmadarbāra*, dated 1860 CE, Shashanka Narain Singh Collection, Varanasi

imported ultramarine was enhanced with golden meanders, evoking the metal-yarn embroidery (*zardozi*) whereas the pale-yellow floor spread covering the entire stretch of the terrace displays a certain variety of floral mesh pattern (*jaṅgalā*) composed of entwining vines in spiralling involutions studded with flower-head finials rendered in shades of vermilion, ultramarine and muted carmine.<sup>27</sup> The terrace backdrop with row of tree-tops beyond the pierced railing, a late-Mughal compositional cliché, was a recurrent pictorial device in many of Mulchand's works (fig. 2 & 3). To add relief to the camphor-white complexion of Śiva the white coverlet of the platform throne was softened with an all-over patterning with diamonds in subtle grey. A streaky skyscape in black, indigo and evening blue with a central opening acts like a counterpoise for the plethora of multi-hued details, added with care and conviction, to the figural imagery and to the backdrop elements.

Mulchand's family guild continued to specialize in *dhyāna-citra* genre till early twentieth century even though the sensorial aesthetics and visual aura of mass-produced chromolithographs of sacred subjects from Bengal and Maharashtra were gaining ground in Banaras. Some of the *dhyāna-citras* executed jointly by Mula's two sons, Batukprasad and Ramprasad, exemplify continuity and innovation of the pictorial diction. They do offer a fascinating admixture of the *dhyāna-citra* essentials of their hereditary atelier and the overwhelming magical realism of the popular prints. Attributed to their joint workmanship, *Ṣoḍaṣī* (fig. 4) is one such unique example anchored to the iconographic template of the Jñāna-Pravāha version on ivory. Here the figural elements, delineated with all the regional image-making specifications unaltered, were enhanced sporadically with rejuvenating accents of luminosity and depth. The terrace backdrop and the embroidered furnishing were rendered with a concern for pattern, denying rational space projection. Up above the row of tree-tops on the right side of the rising emerald green hillock do we notice a temple complex inside a garden laid on Mughal norms. Inclusion of this architectural motif was indeed a specific portrayal of the Devī temple of Ratanbagh<sup>28</sup>, at Ramnagar, constructed by the Mahārājās of Banaras towards the late nineteenth century. Ratanbagh Devī shrine was dedicated to goddess Tripurasundarī or *Ṣoḍaṣī*. One would wonder if this special *dhyāna-citra* of *Ṣoḍaṣī* with sacred architecture was prepared for any member of the Ramnagar royal household who took great fancy in the Mulchand's hereditary



15.3: Ustad Mulchand, *Poet Tulsīdāsa performing āratī to the enthroned Hanumāna attended by Siddhis*, dated 1881, Private Collection

15.4: Batukprasad-Ramprasad Atelier, *Ṣoḍaṣī*, c. 1895 CE, Shashanka Narain Singh Collection, Varanasi

tradition of iconic painting, preferring Batukprasad-Ramprasad to the large number of Patna-Danapur painters already in employ at the court atelier. The rivalry between the painters of the two schools became the legend of the era and in spite of every effort made the successors of Gval Sikkhi, however, failed to make their entry into the Ramnagar elite circle. As multi-media artists they continued to win the heart of the populace, responding to an entire range of challenges, thematic as well as technical.

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. M. Archer, *Company Painting- Indian Paintings of the British Period*, London, 1992, pp. 215-227.
2. Gem-like ivory portraits, still smaller in size, were also mounted in bracelets, tie-pins, buttons or collar studs. They were also worn as brooches. Mounted in jewel-encrusted cases, ivory portraits of Grand Moguls became a part of the fashionable jewellery ensemble to be precise as early as late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest examples of painted ivories in "Company Style" belong to the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, one exquisite set of *ganjīfā* from Murshidabad painted in provincial-Mughal idiom is datable to c. 1760. Glasses for framing metal cases as well as ivory plaques were procured locally in India but some British miniaturists like Ozias Humphery and John Smart preferred to equip themselves with sufficient stock of cards, paper and ivory before they left for India. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ivory portraits of Mughal emperors by Delhi artists were available at a price range viz. Rs. 10 to Rs. 100 and were mounted on jewellery cases as also needle-work boxes made of ivory, ebony or sandalwood. Cf. T.N. Mukherjee, *Art Manufactures of India - specially compiled for Glasgow International Exhibition*, Calcutta, 1888 (reprint 1974, New Delhi), p. 23.
3. Judith Mara Gutman, *Through Indian Eyes*, New York, 1982, p. 107 & 120.
4. R. Von Leyden, *Ganjīfā - the Playing Cards of India*, London, 1982, pp. 110-113, pl. 2.
5. "Green ivory" is the term for the tusks cut from the living elephant or from a freshly dead one. To quote V.P. Dwivedi: "...when freshly cut, the ivory should have a mellow, warm transparent tint, as if soaked in oil, with very little appearance of grain or fibre. The waxy solution dries up considerably by exposure". *Indian Ivories*, New Delhi, 1976, p. 2.
6. Moti Chandra, *The Technique of Mughal Painting*, Lucknow, 1949, p. 16.
7. A mixture of lamp black (*siyāhī*), carmine (*kirmizī*, *gulālī*) and Indian yellow (*peorī*).
8. A film obtained from the deer skin and was used for making tracings of the master drawings. Later, the word *carbā* covered all sorts of tracings and pricked drawings, those on skin as also on paper.

9. The stippling done by British miniaturists with cross-hatching was referred to by the Indian painters as *jālīdāra pardāza*. Other modes were : *gūḍaz pardāza* (shading that melts), *dhunvādhāra pardāza* (shading that creates a foggy effect noticeable in the tremendous rush of a high waterfall) and *dānā pardāza* (stippling with dots to add volume to costumes made of wood, velvet or fur). Hasty stippling with close parallel lines were termed *khat paradāza*.
10. Moti Chandra, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-32.
11. Ed. E.B. Cowell, *Jātaka Stories*, Cambridge, 1895, vol. I, pp. 174-177. The ingrate forester after being brought back to Banaras, his hometown, visited "ivory workers' bāzāra, where he saw ivory being worked into diverse forms and shapes". The craftsmen further informed him that a "living elephant's tusk is worth a great deal more than a dead one's". *ibid.* p. 176.
12. M. Archer, *op. cit.*, p. 219.
13. M. Archer, *Company Drawings in the India Office Library*, London, 1972, pp. 133-34.
14. Mukherjee, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.
15. *ibid.*, p. 24.
16. Linda York Leach, *Mughal and Other Indian Paintings from the Chester Beatty Library*, vol. II, London, 1995, pp. 756-759, colour plate 103. For a contemporary Rajasthani *dhyāna-citra* of Bagalā, one of the Mahāvidyās, cf. O.P. Sharma, *Indian Paintings and Drawings*, New Delhi, 2006, p. 84, p. 169.
17. M. Archer, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
18. Charles Shirreff (active in India between Jan. 1797 and Jan. 1809) had a successful career as a miniature painter in India and made a portrait of Udit Narain Singh. A head and shoulders portrait of the latter on an oval ivory plaque (cf. M. Archer, *op. cit.*, 1992, cat. no. 246, p. 219) by some Patna artist active in Maharaja's atelier, in all probability, was inspired by Shirreff's original. (cf. M. Archer, *op. cit.*, 1992, cat. no. 246, p. 219). Stippling marked by a certain staleness and rather unemphatic drawing of the anonymous Patna artist are reflective of his moderate precision to model with flesh tints.
19. Anand Krishna, "Company Painting at the Benares Court", *Indian Painting - Essays in Honour of K.J. Khandalavala*, ed. B.N. Goswamy, New Delhi, 1995, p. 245.
20. Bharat Kala Bhavan Collection, Varanasi, Acc. No. 305, Pub. Anjan Chakraverty, *Indian Miniature Painting*, New Delhi, 2004, p. 138. There is another version on paper in the same collection, acc. no. 834. Both the works were acquired by Rai Krishnadasa from the family-guild collection of Ustad Ramprasad, great grandson of Ustad Sikkhi.
21. Belonging to the painter families from Bundi active in Banaras in the 17<sup>th</sup> century we know at least about one Lakshmiratna who portrayed tantric *devī* images for esoteric rituals. In 1880s the English traveller H. Lansdell found at Tashkent "a very old icon of goddess Kālī" from

- Banaras painted on a board 'fixed to strong wooden frame", hung inside one worship house of Indian migrants.
22. Anand Krishna, *op. cit.*; A. Chakraverty, "Siva in the Nineteenth Century Banaras Lithographs", *Samarasya*, ed. S. Das & E. Furlinger, New Delhi, 2005, pp. 179-197.
  23. A Chakraverty, "Ustad Mulchand as a Litho Artist", *the Ananda-Vana of Indian Art*, ed. N. Krishna, Varanasi, 2005, pp. 484-494.
  24. Acc. No. 2002.1, Size : 9 x 8 cms. opaque watercolour and gold on ivory.
  25. David Kinsely, *Hindu Goddesses*, Delhi, 1987, p. 164; S.K.Ramachandra Rao, *Devatā-Rūpa-Mālā*, part II, Bangalore, 2003, pp. 94-96.
  26. M. Chandra, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
  27. Depiction of pale-yellow or pale-terreverte floorspreads embellished with interlacing floral meanders seem to have been inspired by the chain-stitch embroidered summer carpets much popular in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century courtly circle of north India. Mulchand repeatedly quoted such a fascinating motif from the visual vocabulary handed down by his ancestors in the form of master drawing. Cf. also pls. 2 & 3. For further details see D. Diamond *et. al.*, *Garden Cosmos : The Royal Paintings of Jodhpur*, England, 2008, Rahul Jain, cat. no. p. 101 & p. 314.
  28. Klaus Rotzer and K. Deokar, "Mughal Gardens in Benaras and Its Neighbourhood in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries", *Confluence of Cultures*, ed. F.N. Delvoye, New Delhi, 1995, pp. 162-63. Incidentally, Ratanbāgh Devī shrine is an important sacred site within the circumference of *Chaurāsīkrosa yātrā* route of the *Kāśī maṇḍala* as referred to in *Padma Purāṇa*.