

A Painted Manuscript Cover from Nepal, Two Initial Episodes of the *Durgā Saptasatī*

Gautama V. Vajracharya

Among the splendid examples of illustrated manuscripts and wooden manuscript covers in the Suresh Neotia Collection (housed in Jñāna-Pravāha : Centre for Cultural Studies and Research, Varanasi) is an eye catching miniature painting rendered on the obverse of a wooden manuscript cover from Nepal (Acc. No. 99.141). The painting exemplifies the work of the late seventeenth or eighteenth century when the artists of Nepal were quite familiar with the Rajput style of painting, but had not completely abandoned the traditional style of painting prevalent in earlier centuries. I propose to discuss the painting in the following order: general description, identification of the scenes, and prominent stylistic features of the painting that help to identify the approximate date of the work.

The manuscript cover is only 26.5 cm. long and 7 cm. wide. In this limited space the unknown artist has depicted two different scenes from *Durgā Saptasatī* (Figs. 3.1-3.3) without using any dividing line or even the marks such as trees or pilasters we might expect to see having encountered such elements in other examples.¹ On the left side of the painting, a ṛṣi-like bearded figure is shown seated on a golden bench supported by lion's claws. This bench is very close to the royal throne of the Malla period, *siṃhāsana*, which is often shown in Nepalese art occupied by royal figures such as the well-known medieval king Pratapa Malla, and other kings of the Malla dynasty of the Kathmandu valley. The ṛṣi's ascetic hairdo is arranged in a voluminous topknot and is tied with the strings of *rudrākṣa*, berries identified as *Elaeocarpus Ganitrus*. We know from multiple artistic and literary works of India and Nepal that traditionally the people of these countries believed that a ṛṣi was as great as *mahārāja*, and *vice versa*. This appears to be the reason that he is shown seated on a royal bench in the classical position befitting a monarch, referred to as *rājālīāsana* (the position of royal ease).

Despite such royal treatment, the ṛṣi is deprived of a nimbus, which one would expect to see around the head and body of such a highly respected figure. His head faces



Fig. 3.1: Wooden cover with scenes from *Durgā Saptasati*



Fig. 3.2: Detail of Fig. 3.1



Fig. 3.3: Detail of Fig. 3.1

right and is slightly lifted upward. He has a smiling face, large eyes, dark hair and a beard. As we will discuss shortly, the way the *ṛṣi's* face is rendered here differs drastically from the traditional style employed for depicting other male and female figures in the same painting. For some reason however, the artist's rendering of the *ṛṣi's* torso and limbs, including the raised right hand and the hanging left hand, is quite rudimentary. He wears a striped royal *dhotī* covering his left shoulder in an *upavīta* style, which is associated with the mannerism prevalent in both secular and religious teaching institutes throughout the cultural history of the subcontinent among the Hindus, Jainas and Buddhists. When a teaching session begins both the teacher and students wear their garment in this particular style. Although in later periods *upavīta* came to mean sacred-thread, originally, it was the name of the style of wearing a shawl diagonally, preferably exposing the right shoulder.

The *ṛṣi* converses with two nimbused dignitaries. Both of them are seated on an ornately decorated, dark blue fluorite carpet which is on the ground, and are wearing red *dhotīs*, multiple necklaces, large golden earrings and crowns. They share the same facial features and expressions. They differ only because one of them has a yellowish-green nimbus, whereas the other figure, further away from *ṛṣi*, has a dark blue nimbus.

This scene can be identified in the light of the story of the goddess Mahāmāyā and recumbent Viṣṇu, the initial episode of the well-known Sanskrit text, *Durgā Saptaśatī* (also known as *Devī Māhātmya*) depicted at the other side of the illumination. According to the text King Suratha was a great king. But he was defeated in battle by his enemy and forced to escape to a forest. While wandering in the forest on horseback, he reached the peaceful *āśrama* or hermitage of *Rṣi* Medhas, who was delighted to have the royal guest in his abode. One day, while wandering in the forest, the king met a *vaiśya* merchant known as Samādhi. Within a short period, they became good friends because just as the king, Samādhi also lost everything as he was expelled by the members of his own family. *Rṣi* Medhas comforted them and told them stories of Mahāmāyā and other mother goddesses. Undoubtedly the *ṛṣi* seated on the royal bench is Medhas. He is shown here narrating the story of the great goddesses to King Suratha, who is facing the *ṛṣi* and the merchant Samādhi, seated behind the king. This scene is depicted in other copies of the *Durgā Saptaśatī* manuscript, as exemplified by such illustrated work in the collection of Catherine and Ralph Benkain.²

In accordance with traditional view a storyteller was more respectable than a king while he was in the process of telling a religious story. This scene certainly reflects that view and is another reason that the *ṛṣi* is shown seated on the throne while the king and the merchant are on the ground.

The mother goddess's name Mahāmāyā "great illusion" is a philosophical term

based on the well-known theory that the phenomena of the world appears to us real, in reality this is illusion, emotional attachment being part of the cosmic illusion. Those people who understand the theory lead a happy life devoid of any attachment to the world. Because the philosophical view was too deep to comprehend for lay people like the King Suratha and the merchant Samādhī, the ṛṣi made an effort to explain it with the story of the goddess and Viṣṇu (Fig. 3.2).

According to the story, at the end of the cosmic time *kalpa*, the entire world periodically becomes annihilated when it is being inundated. As a result, multiple oceans, including the atmospheric ocean (cloud), turn into a single ocean (*ekārṇava*). It remains so until the next creation begins. Unlike historical time, this mythical time *kalpa* is not linear, but circular. It reoccurs in regular interval. In fact, the annual year is believed to be the diminutive version of such period; the four months of the rainy seasons being the end of the time, described in Sanskrit literature as *pralaya*, when Viṣṇu slumbers on the coil of the serpent god Śeṣa (also known as Ananta), floating on the gentle waves of the great ocean. This is the time when a giant lotus miraculously emerges from the navel of Viṣṇu and the creator god Brahmā peacefully meditates while seated at the middle of the lotus. This is the story depicted on the right section of the painting (Fig. 3.3). The semicircular linear patterns represent the waves of the ocean shown here as a rectangular pond. In the history of South Asian art, artists have described the scene of *pralaya* in many occasions, with a wide variety of style.³ Here, the Nepali artist chose to represent the scene as to imitate the seventh century monumental stone sculpture of recumbent Viṣṇu enshrined in a small pond at the bottom of a hill in the northern border of the Kathmandu valley (Fig. 3.4).

Although the theme is popular in South Asian art, it is particularly true in Nepalese art perhaps because the cult of recumbent Viṣṇu in Nepal is closely associated with the belief that having an auspicious sight or *darśana* of recumbent Viṣṇu at the end of life one secures the next birth in heaven. The old Malla palace of Kathmandu, known as Hanuman Dhoka, contains a room designed for the dying members of the royal family to spend his or her last days and to prepare for the unpredictable journey of next life. On the ceiling of the room, there is a repousse golden canopy with the image of Jalaśāyī Viṣṇu. The main purpose of the image on the ceiling is to provide the person on the deathbed with the *darśana* of the god, which is placed immediately below the image (Fig. 3.5).

Likewise, on the banks of the rivers close to the cremation grounds of the valley, we often see a bed-like stone slab with the image of Jalaśāyī Viṣṇu carved on the semicircular top of slab. It is believed that if a person takes the last breath of his life while lying on such



Fig. 3.4: Recumbent Viṣṇu, Būḍhānilakaṅṭha, Kathmandu (photo author)



Fig. 3.5: Recumbent Viṣṇu, ceiling, Hanumanadhoka Palace, Kathmandu (photo author)

a slab, that person will spend his or her next life in Vaikuṅṭha, Viṣṇu's heaven. How the death is related with the iconography of Jalaśāyī Viṣṇu is a challenging question. It is highly possible that the oceanic water on which Viṣṇu relaxes for four months of the rainy season symbolizes both celestial and terrestrial water, which circulates in the form of rain and river between heaven and earth. Mythical oceans and rivers are often depicted in South Asian art with lotuses blossoming above the water. This artistic convention is reiterated here emphatically showing three giant lotuses, one at the left corner of the water, the other two at the right.

Viṣṇu has a dark complexion, which indicates his identity with Kṛṣṇa. In Rajput paintings from a later period, Kṛṣṇa is almost shown as sky blue. But in earlier Rajput paintings, we expect sometimes to see him all black and sometimes dark blue. In Nepalese painting, only after the artists of the country became fully exposed to Rajput style of painting, around the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Kṛṣṇa became sky blue. Traditionally, as in the present example, he is either black or dark blue. (Fig. 3.3). It is interesting to note that in Sanskrit the word *nīla* or *śyāma* "dark blue," which is also the god's epithets, are used in literature as synonyms for black pigment. Viṣṇu usually wears a yellow *dhotī*, but here he is shown wearing a red and orange *dhotī* with a yellow border and the ribbon-like middle pleated section in yellow. As prescribed in the texts, the god has four arms and holds his usual attributes, *padma*, *cakra*, *śaṅkha* and *gadā* clockwise. He wears a golden crown, earrings, and multiple necklaces, bracelets and armlets. Just above the head of the god, one can detect the seven heads of the snake Śeṣa (also known as Ananta) on whose body Viṣṇu is lying peacefully. The eyes of the snake are characterized by their wide open circular shape. With greater attention, one can also detect the red stem of the lotus emerging from Viṣṇu's navel. The stem meanders upward partially overlapped by the left arm of the god, but the giant lotus with red and yellow petals arranged in two layers is rendered vividly. On the lotus, four-armed, four-headed Brahmā appears with a golden complexion meditating in a yogic posture. His peaceful eyes and the way he sits comfortably on the lotus do not indicate that he soon will be facing any trouble. The *Durgā Saptasatī* and its oral and textual interpretations tell us that when Brahmā was meditating peacefully on that giant lotus, two powerful demons named Madhu and Kaiṭabha emerged from the earwax of Viṣṇu while he was still in deep sleep. The demons found the emergence of lotus from the navel of the god amazing. When they saw Brahmā residing on the flower, they became even more excited. They grabbed the lotus stem and began to shake it violently. Greatly troubled by such a demonic act, Brahmā called the goddess Mahāmāyā, who is described in the text as identical with Yoganidrā, the goddess representing the yogic

slumber of Viṣṇu. With her help, Brahmā was able to awaken Viṣṇu, who eventually abolished the demons but with great difficulties due to their challenging strength.

In our painting, the demons are shown flanking the recumbent image of Viṣṇu. The demons approach the god striding aggressively and raising both hands with the erect forefinger, an aggressive gesture known to Sanskrit literature as *tarjanī*, which literally means “scolding and threatening.” Although the figure of the demon on the left is slightly damaged, one can see that both of them are attired in red and yellow *dhotī*, on top of which they wear a close-fitting upper dress called *kañcuka*, an armour type of jacket foreign to South Asian attire. Quite often in Indian and Nepalese works, demons are represented as foreigners. Note also the fact that they have moustaches, which we do not expect to see when Indic gods (except a few like Bhairava, Aghora Śiva etc.) are represented in a traditional manner. Bulky dark hair exceeding the metal crown and upper eyelid, which is painted red, are other features of demonic countenance. Similar representations of demonic figures appear in other Nepalese works depicting Māra assaulting to Buddha Śākyamuni.⁴

Although the demons are about to disturb the pervading cosmic tranquility, apparently, this is a scene before Viṣṇu became aware of the troublesome situation. However, the goddess Mahāmāyā or Yoganidrā symbolizing Viṣṇu’s sleep is already alert and aware of the impending demonic assault. She is shown flying in the atmosphere and moving through the stylized cloudscape near Brahmā on his right. She does not have wings, but her flight is indicated by an age old custom of depicting divine and semi-divine figures of atmosphere and heaven in an aerodynamic posture in which one of the legs of the figure is bent and stretched forward keeping it close to the diagonally projected torso, the other extends backward away from the torso and is slightly or fully bent.

In our example, although the goddess is depicted in this flying posture, due to the symbolic treatment of the figure she seems not to be flying but seated on a variegated stylized cloud. She wears a golden tiara and her head is encircled with dark blue nimbus. Her four hands hold various attributes but because of the diminutive nature of the painting, it is difficult to identify them correctly.

Perhaps the most striking stylistic element that attracts our attention is the dazzlingly bright red coloured background. We do see such poinsettia-like bright colour used for the surface of painting not only in Nepalese works dating back to eleventh century, but also in almost contemporaneous Jaina manuscript illuminations from Gujarat.⁵ Although the appearance of Ajanta-styled stylized rocky hills in both Jaina and Nepali artistic traditions indicates their historical association with Ajanta-styled paintings, to my knowledge, nowhere on an Ajanta wall can such scarlet background be seen. This observation leads us to believe

that the tradition of manuscript painting in South Asia derives not directly from the Ajanta tradition but from an original source that had some stylistic association with Ajanta wall paintings.

Mughal-Rajput influences began to appear in Nepali work in the seventeenth century. However, most Nepali artists, even after they were exposed to the Mughal and Rajput style of painting, continued to create their works in the traditional style. Characteristically, the Nepalese artists are always willing to learn new ideas and assimilate them into their works but this was done without immediately abandoning pre-existing artistic elements. As a result an enduring transitional phase, in which one can expect to see both traditional and Mughal-Rajput style, dominates the history of the medieval period in Nepalese painting. The manuscript painting under discussion is an example of this transitional phase. Note that the countenances of most of the figures in our example are rendered in three-quarters profile. Consequently, the other side of the face, closer to the picture plane, is almost completely overlapped. Even so, the eye on that side of the face is still partially visible. This way of rendering human faces goes back to the eleventh century and was almost certainly prevalent even in earlier periods. In this traditional style human faces rendered in strong profile are difficult to find. Only after the Nepali artists began to take an interest in the Mughal-Rajput style of painting, they rendered the human face in full profile. This reached at its height toward the end of the eighteenth century. In our present example, the only figure executed in the Mughal-Rajput style is the image of the 'Rṣi' Medhas. Apparently, the artist realized that a figure rendered in full profile creates an aura of dignity and emphasizes the formality of an occasion. Because the *ṛṣi* is the most important figure in the scene, the rendition of his face in profile was helpful to convey that message.

Several features such as the large eye, with the pupil placed close to the tear duct, the slightly upward gaze, and the minimal size to the back of the head remind us of seventeenth and eighteenth century Rajput painting style. The history of Nepalese painting prior to seventeenth century is totally absent of such treatments of the human head. It is also interesting to note that, although the artist decided to render the *ṛṣi*'s head in the Rajput style, he executed all other figures (both human and divine) in the traditional style, without much detail but in a rudimentary linear style. In fact, except the head, even the torso and limbs of the *ṛṣi* for some unknown reasons are also rendered rudimentarily. As mentioned earlier, although the heads of the king and merchant are encompassed by nimbuses, the head of the *ṛṣi* is unexpectedly devoid of such a feature. The reason for this is almost certainly associated with the fact that the artist chose to depict the *ṛṣi* in the Rajput style, in which the nimbus did not feature with the same regularity as it did in earlier South Asian art.

The colourful cloud through which Mahāmāyā is shown flying is delineated with an elongated tail configuration connected to the rippled water of the ocean. The cloud therefore appears to be emerging from the ocean. Such stylized clouds with conspicuous tails derive from the Chinese tradition of drawing and painting. To my knowledge, it appeared for the first time in the artistic history of the Indian subcontinent in the series of *Nimatnāmā* manuscript paintings executed in Mandu around C.E. 1500. It arrived in Nepal during the seventeenth century, as exemplified by the scene of the birth of the Buddha and the first seven steps illustrating the *Aṣṭasāhasrika Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript dated 1682.⁷ It is therefore not only the Rajput-style rendition of ṛṣi's face in full profile but also the stylized cloud that lead us to believe that this painting is the work of a late seventeenth or early eighteenth century Nepalese artist.

References and Notes

1. Gautama V. Vajracharya, "A Wooden Cover with Scenes from the *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*", R.C. Sharma, Kamal Giri, (ed.), *Indian Art Treasures : Suresh Neotia Collection*, Jñāna-Pravāha: Centre for Cultural Studies and Research, Varanasi, 2006, p. 75, fig. 60; *Watson Collection of Indian Miniatures at The Elvehjem Museum of Art*, Madison, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2002, p. 199, fig. 129.
2. Mary Shepherd Slusser, "Illustrated Folios from a *Devi Mahatmya* Manuscript," Vidya Dehejia, *Devi : The Great Goddess*, Washington: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1999, pp.226-229, fig. a. Erroneously, Slusser identifies the Ṛṣi Medhas, as Cāmuṇḍā and the King Suratha and the merchant Samādhi facing to the Ṛṣi as "a god and his consort." The text in the manuscript is in Sanskrit but she believes that it is in Newārī language.
3. One of the earliest sculptural representations of recumbent Viṣṇu is the well-known image from the sculpted panel on the South facade of the Viṣṇu temple, Deogarh, c. 500 C.E. For illustration, see C. Craven Roy, *Indian Art*, New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1985, p. 120, fig. 79. The story given in *Durgā Saptasatī* is slightly different from its earlier version found in the Vaiṣṇava *Purāṇas*. The scene of recumbent Viṣṇu depicted in Rajput paintings, like our present example, is closely related to the story that is described in the *Durgā Saptasatī*. For a Rajput example, see Vidya Dehejia (ed.), *Devi, the Great Goddess, Female divinity in South Asian Art*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1999, p. 42, fig.2.
4. Hugo E. Kreijger, *Kathmandu Valley Painting*, London, Serindia Publications, 1999, pp. 48-49, fig. 11.
5. Multiple Jaina examples can be found in Ratan Parimoo, *Gujarati School and Jaina Manuscript Paintings*, Ahmedabad: Gujarat Museum Society, 2010, pp. 75-136. In Jaina manuscript paintings, a blue coloured background is an alternative choice. Light blue background, although extremely rare, is also found in early Nepalese manuscript painting.
6. For illustration, see Milo Cleveland Beach, *The New Cambridge History of India, Mughal and Rajput Painting*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 14, fig. 7.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 171, fig. 130.