

Narrative Scenes in Akabar Style Painting: An Analytical Study

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Mughal style, Harivans Puran, Hamzanama, Razmnama, Akbarnama.	Akbar (1556-1605CE), was an extraordinary ruler, who not only consolidated the political power of his empire but also greatly influenced the artistic and cultural life of India. While consolidating Mughal dynastic empire in India, evolved a court style of painting, usually designated as the “Mughal style” painting. It was a rolling art movement which started with fusion of the Timurid style with local (Pre Rajsthani) painting tradition. A large atelier of painters worked for him and mostly produced illustrated manuscript besides individual paintings.

1. Introduction

The conquest of Hindustan in 1526 by Babur, a descendent in the fifth generation from Timur, or Tamerlane, brought Persian art and culture to India. Babur (1526-1530), the founder of the Mogul, or Mughal, dynasty, was known as a learned philosopher and a wide traveller and lover of nature. Like his ancestors, the Timurid princes, he showed great interest in the art of painting and had a large collection of illuminated Persian manuscripts, illustrated by famous painters of the Herat school, among them Bihzad and his pupils. Akbar was an extraordinary ruler, who not only consolidated the political power of his empire but also greatly influenced the artistic and cultural life of India.

He was tolerant of other races and religions. The native Rajputs were employed by Akbar in the

administration and the army. He favoured marriages between Mughals and Hindu women, and two of his own wives were Rajput princesses. Akbar had inherited Painting tradition which saw a number of narrative scenes historical of fiction.¹ The list was enlarged by addition of some of “histories” written at the Imperial command translated into Persian, the court language, by the erudite and illustrated by the Imperial master artist.² We know that weekly inspection was carried out at the atelier and painters were rewarded (or reprimanded) on the basis of their performance.³ This introductory remark was necessary to place illustrated manuscripts produced by the Akbari atelier in their proper perspective.

These texts along with the illustrations, where usually anecdotal which left the painters to visualize the scenes in a standardized tradition. For

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53724/jmsg/v10n3.05>

Received 15th Nov. 2024; Accepted 30th Dec. 2024

Available online 30th Jan. 2025

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example, the environs remained Akbari, irrespective of their historical or geographical distinctions. This can be seen in the architectural settings, costume types, etc. and general surroundings.⁴ In exceptional cases, a degree of “historical” perspective was introduced, as for example, one can find in the “histories” of the Timurids or Mongols, or here and there in early Babar period episode. Similarly, the Hindu “mythologies” (for example Harivansa, the Mahabharata or Ramayana) found introduction of “Hindu costume” as envisaged by the Akbari artist-atelier or sometimes a degree of Hindu architecture. Sometimes this created a curious mixture of anachronism and legendary background. For example, a scene from the (Persian translation of) Harivans Puran now in Bharat Kala Bhavan collection, show the legendary King Prithu chasing the Cow Earth (fig. 1)⁵ the king is dressed as a Brahmanical figure as he travels in the sky, while the rest of the world (i.e. our historical world) appears down below, having the event in the Akbari attire. A third component is the European elements similarly anachronistic. we know that Akbar was exposed to European painting from the 17th of the 16th century, as the Portuguese Jesuits brought as presents, their originals. Yet these are unimportant additions, quite in courageous to the central scene, employed to show deep background with European Human figures, distant architecture etc.

Our present discussion starts with the hamzanama cloth paintings. We are told that 1200 or 1400 large size Scenes on cloth was printed for Akbar, who used to relate this romance with the expertise of a

professional story teller to the denizens of his Haram.⁶

This shows a suitable relationship between the oral and visual narrations of the events. The scenes are threaded together with the recurrences of major actors, led by Amir Hamza his associates or villains. Yet setting is in standard Akbari mode. A curious mysterious air haunts the scenes, setting examples for the succeeding decades of Akbari narrative paintings. Certain devices were evolved a desolate landscape, away from the city environs, for example, is shown by introducing the palace (or fort) architecture in distance background, with tall tropical forestry with its wild life as the stage of events.

As we come to the middle stage of Akbari paintings, we are faced with new types of narratives, including the “Histories” Unfortunately our understanding is limited in the areas of translated Persian editions of the Mahabharata (Razmnama) and the Ramayan, since these are known to us through scanty Publications. Yet these offered unlimited scope for narration, as we shall see below but it would be of interest to briefly go through the planning of these illustrated texts, their scribing and interspersing illustrations. Fortunately, Akbar and his painters inherited a rich background of manuscript writing and illustrating the text, which required a careful planning of the text, so as to leave adequate spaces for illustrations, both full pages of sometimes half of quarter page. Following this tradition, the text ran through the illustration, as small or large panels. Thus, it needed extremely careful co-ordinations among the producers, scribes and artists.

Yet this tradition of text running through the illustrations, or threading together, stimulated the narrative quality of the scenes. For example, in the Mahabharata chakra-vyuha scene, a full-page illustration runs in two folios, the kaurav army standing still, almost like ants or insects though which the events progress in a slow motion. It is interesting to find that this challenging event (now divided in two folios) was allocated to the legendary painter Daswant, who was hailed as the top most painter of the court. On the other hand, a violent scene in the same manuscript was again divided into two folios, and between two master painters, Daswant and Basawan, showing their predictions. The opening scene of the Kichaka-Draupadi episode was allotted to Daswant where Bhima in his violent form suddenly appears as through like an out breast save his wife (Draped) form molestation. Daswant's energetic lines and almost free hand drawing are noteworthy, while the concluding page (of this double- page) is worked out by Basawan with a high degree of refinement, as the fair Draupadi (here Sairandhri) despondently site, on the pyre, drawn by a host of carriers.

As a contrast to the mythical scenes, here we refer to Histories illustrated for Akbar. Fortunately, a few scenes appear in two manuscripts simultaneously, where similarity or otherwise can be detected. To ovoid this lengthy discussion, before we take up the specifie instances, it is worth noting that following early Timurid tradition, most probably Akabar's painters accompanied the emperor in his sojourns, to the war theatre included.

In the illustrated manuscript of Akbarnama (mostly

in Victoria and Albert Museum, London), fortunately we have scenes to show a few different types of narration. In some cases, overlapping events can be stretched out like a motion picture, here appearing simultaneously, for example "Akbar hunting Tigers".

Between the two folios of this double page illustration, we find a few Tigers cut to halves while a human beater mauled etc.⁷ Each section could be a painting in itself. The second example in Akbar taming down the elephant amok Hawaii while chasing the fleeing pachyderm, Ram Banka (or Bagha).⁸ The introductory verso folio (on the left) is the spill over where the beasts cross the river Yamuna, while the introductory scenes are on the concluding folio recto (on the right) where the episode starts. Thus, apparently the sequence seems to be reserved.

A third event is "Akbar inspects a battle" (between two rival sanyasi groups). Here the emphasis is divided between the emperor mounted on his horse over a scarp and the poor victim, a bejeweled head of a sadhu group, being cut across by a blade, surrounded by his wailing chelas. This show that the artist shifted the emphasis of the event from Akbar to the gory tragic ending (compare the Hawaii scene, above). The main scene is work of the celebrated Basawan.

Finally we take up the masterly depiction, "Siege of fort Ranthaanbhor" by Miskin. One of the grandest creations of the artist. Here again the scene is spread over to folios, the main scene on the left, is practically a non-descript siege scene yet the following folio has the full-blooded depiction of mounting of Imperial artillery,⁹ (atop a hillock

confronting the fort) which not only dominates the pictorial composition, but appears as the nerve centre of the painting composition. A super war effort where men and animals equally participate as if caught in a frenzy of a wild dance. It is to be noted that this group of illustrations totally differs from the standardized battle scenes, quite frequently appearing in the early Mughal painting. Here we come across certain traditional arrangement. For example, showing an interior scene, as though implanted in the cross section of the architecture, we find both in the hamzanama hamzanama series and Cleveland Tutinama as interior scene of prison in this mannerism. Another example is “People in a well”.

Referring back to the Akbarnamah illustrations, it is interesting to compare similar looking scenes in historical manuscripts, like some of the illustrated manuscripts of Babarnama, Akabarnama or Tawarikh-e- Khandan- e- Taimuria, like Darbar scenes, hunting scenes etc. Apart from these they appear as text illustrations like in the fable book, the Anwar-e-Suhaili, Tutinama etc.

For example the Darbar scenes, now a part of the narratives, have full ambiance of any early Mughal court thought here as introductory scenes another familiar setting where we find the imposter medico being forced to gulp poison which he had inadvertently administered to the young princess, causing her untimely and accidental demise. This is a harem scene, suggested by the enclosing boundary wall. Noteworthy is the restricted group of players in the episode, as against the crowded Darbar scenes. This practically compares well, in its compositional sitting, to the scene “Mother

mistaking a cow for the God of death” except that here the atmosphere is humble.

Now we take up some set compositions which were handed down to the Akbari artists and thus repeatedly appear in illustrated manuscripts like the Anwar-e-Suhaili illustrations. Here we take up for example, the scene Camel Rider and Snake (fig.2).¹⁰ The composition has been borrowed from the pre-Mughal Timurid illustrated manuscript with minor changes. The Kala bhavan manuscript illustration shows deeper background, as is popularly known at this stage of the Akbari style. These have no direct relevance to the scene but are provided to show a desolate background, away from the urban civilization. As has been pointed out, the deeper the background the heavier influence of Flemish paintings. It is interesting to find here out of context though, Europeans tending their horses, further their city- scapes with tall minarets etc. And even harbours and ships. To a patron who was exposed to such devices, it hardly interfered with the flow of main events. A similar example is “Drowning of The Chinese princess” (fig.3)¹¹ or “the illusion of God of death”. Actually, these need further investigation to show that similar looking compositions are harnessed in different contexts.

An unusual example is from an illustration from Jami’s Baharistan manuscript, scribed and illustrated for Akbar. Here is the story of an infidel wife and the resultant revolt in her family (fig. 4).¹² The main theme, secret meeting is pushed deep in the background, while the foreground shows in full-scale the boisterous neighbours shouting against the infidelity. This

can be explained as pasteurisation of the dramatic part of the episode by the painter, the celebrated Miskin have employed his full talent to project the explosive situation.

Another but still more challenging illustration has a sophistic background based on Shadi's Gulistan. The parable has it a teacher was elaborating in detail to his pupils the concept of love, as a passer-by Sufi collapsed in a trance having the world love falling in his ears. This takes that Centre place of the sales of emphasise deeper the concept (that all philosophical/deliberations fail where the real experience of love, here Ishq-e-higiqi or divine love) overtakes you, which no length of mental exercise can reach that supreme stage of consciousness. Thus, a single figure (of an entranced Sufi) illustrated the entered episode, of her details from the background.

Here in the end we take up some of the contemporary events, illustrated for the Emperor, as part of contemporary history. We find a degree of history by introducing recognizable faces, here called as "nami Chehra" or "named faces". This task was assigned to specialists in this area, which is clearly endorsed by the clerical entries. It is likely that master portrait was identifying and was harnessed from time to time.

Here we take a slight diversion to prove the point. We know from Abul Fazal that a large corpus of portraits was evolved at the emperor's command.¹³ Unfortunately just a few examples are known to us. Out of the Assemblage scenes, we find besides the emperor's portraits, portraits of Man Singh, Mota Raja Uday Singh, Tansen, Birbal and most likely Abul Fazal himself, out of scores of such scenes.

Yet several other devices were used to show the authenticity of a scene, for example the scene chastisement of Adam Khan through death penalty. We have three version of this ghastly event, out of which the Victoria and Albert Museum. Akbarnama illustrated folio is certainly superior. The three-episode drama is arranged in horizontal panels. The bottom shows the ill-fated khan already ambushed and lying dead. Here is the tragic end of the court intrigues between the grantees and the wet-nurse which was powerful for wrong region and their leader Aadam Khan had the audacity of braking into the minister's apartment and commit the crime. The main panel which takes centre stage almost half of the field of the painting, where the victim of Imperial wrath, Aadam Khan was hurled down from the upper ramparts for Fatehpur Sikari, the ministers and other gentleman in waiting take cover on either direction, pell-mell. The artist has connected the top panel with the flight of steps in the corner, suggestively leading to the haram from where the emperor emerged in wrath a highly rare situation. The vein Adam Khan was forcing entry in the forbidden area of the harem, where Akbar was resting who hearing a ruckus between the guards and the naughty intruder, burst out, delivered a deadly blow to the offender and ordered the victim to be bodily thrown below. In the sequential development of the events, the usual arrangement of left to right or right to left progression was changed here, being in horizontal panel format one, on the top of the other. A minor but important point has been made by the artist Akbar is shown, dressed in the Hindu attire (compare in Ramayana and Mahabharata

illustrations for Akabar) this shows that this was his “informal custom in his relaxed moments”.

The British Library Akbarnama (C1605C.E) has an illustration Abul Fazal presenting the manuscript of Aaine Akbari to his patron. This is a rare instance that his companion, Birbal is identifiable two christian Missionaries distinguished by their features and peculiar custom. The important feature is that the architecture of the Ibadat khana where such meeting took place is depicted. Rarely such authentic settings are seen in Akbari paintings.

The above short account of narration in Akhbar School paintings gives us some idea of the creative forces and skills which worked to help in creation of narrative scenes in Imperial Akbari illustrated manuscripts. It is very vast theme and requires months and years of study and research. Here we humbly present some main points and simple example.



Fig. 2 A Camel rider rescuing the snake from fire, Anwar-e-Suhaili, 1597C.E, Bharat Kala Bavan, Varanasi



Fig. 1, A scene from Harivamsa: Prithu chasing the Earth cow, Mughal, C 1590, Bharar Kala Bhavan, Varanasi

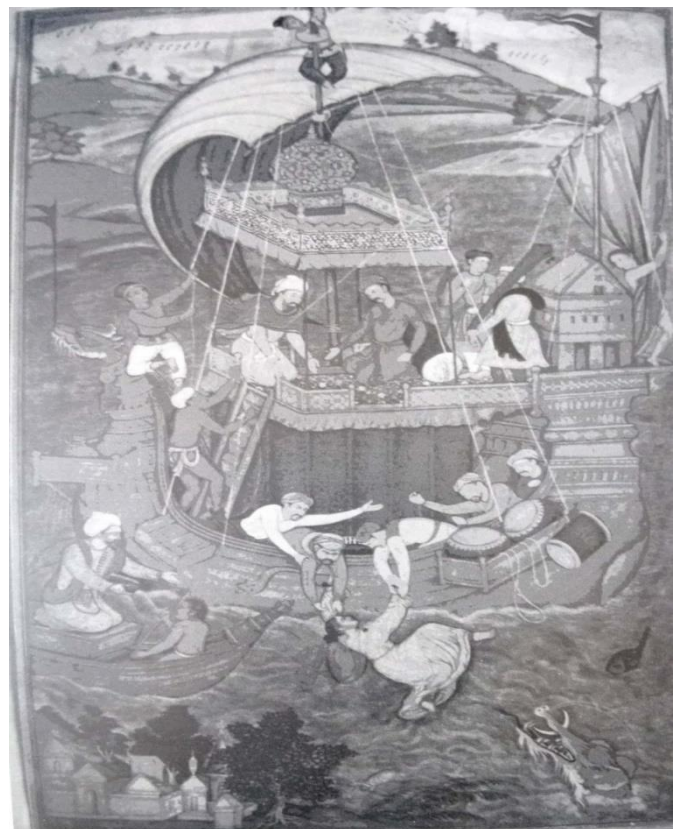


Fig. 3: A Chinese prince being thrown in the river, Anwar-e-Suhaili, 1597 C.E, Bharat Kala Bavan, Varanasi.

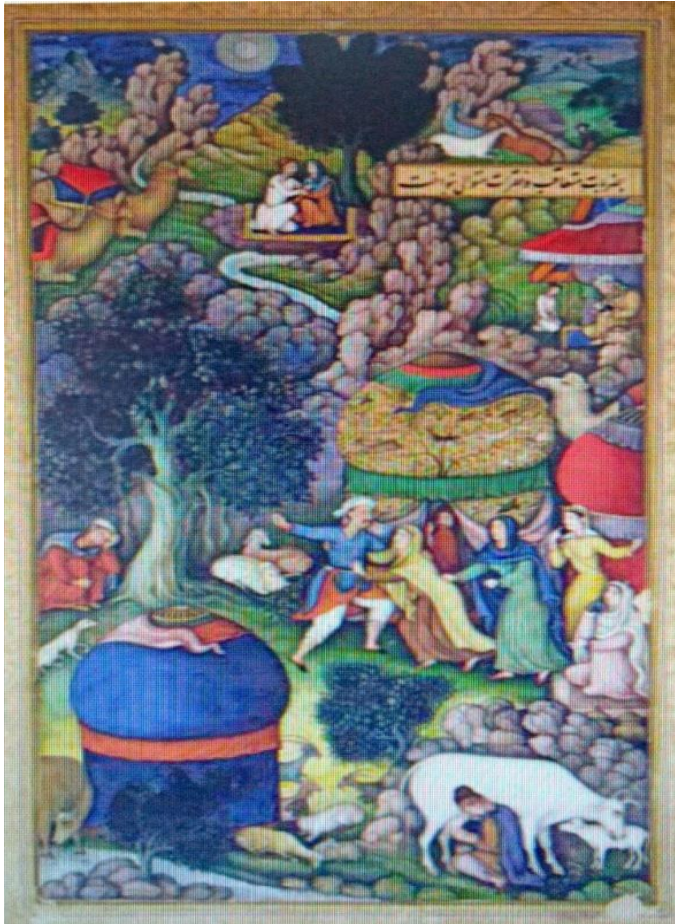


Fig. 4: The story of the unfaithful wife, Mughal, 1595 C.E, Bodleian, Oxford

Endnotes:

- ¹ Hamzanama, Tutanama, Anwar-i-Suhaily, Kathasarit Sagar, Razmnama, Ramayan, Akbarnama, etc.
- ² Shahnama, Tawarikh Khandan-i-Tamuria, Babarnama, etc.
- ³ Abul Fazl, The Ain-i-Akbari, Vol. I. by H Blochmann, Delhi, 1989, p.113
- ⁴ R.H.Pinder- Wilson, Paintings from the Muslim Courts of India, Westerham, 1975, catalogue no. 55
- ⁵ Anand Krishna (editor) Chhavi I, Banaras, 1971, Plate C.
- ⁶ Rai Krishnadas, Bharat ki chitrkala, kasha, 1940, p.124
- ⁷ Welch, S.C, The Art of Mughal India, New York, 1964, plate 11
- ⁸ Pinder, R.H, Wilson, op.cit, Catalogueno, 37.
- ⁹ Welch, S.C, op.cit. plate 11
- ¹⁰ Krishndas, Rai Anwar-e-Suhaily, Varanasi, 1999, plate H
- ¹¹ Ibid, plate K
- ¹² Barrett, Douglas and Basil Gray, Painting of India, 1963, plate.88
- ¹³ Fazl, Abul, op.cit, p.114-115