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# Indian Miniature Paintings: An Incredible Cultural Heritage

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**\*Corresponding author:** Dr. Shuchi Srivastava, Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, National Post Graduate College, An Autonomous College of University of Lucknow, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India**Received Date:** March 25, 2022**Published Date:** April 18, 2022**Abstract**

Art and artistic expression are an important dimension of human culture that has made man 'Homo aestheticus'. Indian paintings relating to the ancient past of the country can be broadly classified into two categories: murals and miniatures. Miniature paintings were painted on a small scale on perishable materials such as paper and cloth for books or albums. The present paper deals with the emergence and development of miniature paintings in India. It is basically a conceptual paper, therefore, mainly secondary sources of data have been used for the study. Starting with the Pala style, several schools of miniature paintings were developed in different regions of India during the last several centuries. These were the result of the social, religious, economic and political scenario of the respective regions of India. Although they were influenced by each other, they also had their own distinct characteristics. Important schools of Indian miniature paintings are Pala, Jain, Mughal, Rajasthan, Orissa, Pahari and Deccan schools. Miniature paintings form a very significant facet of Indian culture, as they are important conveyor of times gone by. Also, all these schools of miniatures are a testament to the importance of art in Indian culture. Therefore, through this paper based on ancient miniature paintings, readers can get special information about the culture concerned.

**Keywords:** Art, Artistic expressions, Indian paintings, Miniature paintings**Introduction**

Human is a social animal with his specific speciality 'culture', the learned and shared behaviour. Art and artistic expression are an important dimension of human culture that has made man 'Homo aestheticus', the artistic man. In fact 'art' was one of the earliest methods of emotional expression through signs in the human past. Indian miniature paintings are one of the best examples of handmade forms of visual art in India. In the historical past, the earliest miniature paintings date back to the 7th century AD, when they were developed with the support of the Palas of Bengal.

**Origin of Art in India**

The first evidence of artistic expression of man in India dates to the Lower Palaeolithic period of the Stone Age. A series of petroglyphs discovered in the ancient Quartzite Auditorium Cave at Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh, India, is believed to be the oldest known prehistoric art. This cave art includes several cupules that were carved out of the rock surface. These were non-utilitarian crescent-shaped cup-shaped depressions (Figure 1). This rock art is dated from at least 290,000 BC to 700,000 BC [1].



**Figure 1:** Petroglyph, Auditorium Cave at Bhimbetka [1].

### Earliest rock paintings in India

Indian painting is a very ancient tradition. Although very few early examples have survived due to natural decay, those evidence suggest that it has a long history in Indian art. The earliest Indian paintings were rock paintings belonging to the Mesolithic period of prehistoric times and are about 30,000 years old. The first rock painting in India was reported by Archibald Carlley at Sohaghat in the Mirzapur district of Uttar Pradesh in 1867-68, twelve year

before the discovery of Altamira in Spain [2-5].

The Adamgarh, Mahoba and Bhimbetka hills in Vindhya Range of Madhya Pradesh are full of Mesolithic paintings (Figure 2). Mathpal divided these paintings according to colouring pattern into four technical styles: Dry colour or crayon painting; Wet transparent colour painting; Wet opaque or oil tempera painting; and Spray colour painting [4,6].



**Figure 2:** Rock Art at Bhimbetka [4].

### Historical background of ancient paintings in India

Indian paintings related to the ancient past of the country portray the life and culture of the people of that time. Literary records and evidence show that from ancient times painting was considered an important form of artistic expression for both scholars and religion. Ancient paintings of India can be broadly classified into two categories: murals and miniatures. Murals are large paintings that are painted on solid structures such as walls of caves and rock shelters. Miniature paintings are work done on

a very small scale for books or albums. These were painted on perishable materials such as paper and cloth [7].

### Antiquity of Mural Paintings in India

The historical background of surviving examples of earliest Indian murals can be traced back to the ancient and early medieval periods, i.e. from the 2nd century BC to the 8th-10th century AD. More than twenty sites have been identified around India that have murals from this period and are mainly natural caves and rock-cut chambers. The best examples of these are the caves of Ajanta,

Ellora, Bagh, Sittanavasal, Armamalai and Ravan Chhaya rock shelter. Generally Buddhist, Jain and Hindu religious themes were depicted in these ancient murals, for example the mural painting at Ajanta of 'Valokitesvara', or 'Padmapāni', a bodhisattva, symbolises

the compassion of all Buddhas (Figure 3). In some sites like ancient theatre hall in Jogimara Cave, mural paintings were used to decorate the premises [8,9].



**Figure 3:** Mural Painting at Ajanta Cave [9].

### Origin of Indian miniature paintings

Indian miniature paintings are one of the best examples of handmade forms of visual arts in India. The earliest miniature paintings date back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. At that time, these were grown by the backing of the Palas of Bengal, when Buddhist texts and scriptures were illustrated on palm leaf manuscripts, with images of Buddhist deities. The main centres of these artistic and intellectual activities were Nalanda, Odantapuri, Vikramshila and Somarpura. Thus, miniatures were first portrayed as illustrations on palm-leaf manuscripts. Main feature of Pala art was soft colours and elegant line which evocate the murals in Ajanta [10-13].

### Methodology

The present paper deals with the emergence and development of miniature paintings in India. It is basically a conceptual paper; therefore, mainly the secondary sources of data have been used for the study. Most of the facets are described with the help of illustrations.

### Discussion

#### Miniature Paintings

Miniature painting is an ancient form of art in India with various schools. Miniatures are delicate and handmade paintings and are smaller in size than normal paintings. A rule that many believe is that to qualify as a miniature painting, it must be no larger than 25 square inches or 100 square centimetres and the subject must be painted no more than one-sixth of its actual size [15]. The significant features of miniature paintings are:

- I. These small and elegant drawings are done on wooden tables, ivory panels, paper, marble, vellum, leather, copper, walls and even on cloth.
- II. The colours used are generally handmade and prepared

from natural resources like vegetables, minerals, shells, precious stones and pure gold and silver etc.

III. The paintings are generally associated with the 'Ragas', the melodies of Indian classical music.

IV. These miniatures provide an idea about the lives of royals and common people, the beauty of women and the inspiration and dedication of the artists themselves [14].

#### School of Miniature Painting in India

Starting with the Pala style, various schools of miniature paintings were developed in different regions of India during the last several centuries. These schools were the result of the social, religious, economic, and political scenario of the respective regions of India. Although these were influenced by each other, they also had their own distinct features. The important schools of Indian miniature paintings are:

##### Pala School of Miniature Painting

This is the oldest school of miniature paintings. It dates to the 7th century AD and developed under the patronage of the Palas of Bengal. It highlighted the symbolic use of colours. The main themes were various aspects of the life of Lord Buddha (Figure 5). Apart, other deities were also portrayed (Figure 5). This school is widespread in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Burma, Tibet, and South-East Asian countries. Along with the emphasis on the symbolic use of colours, other protuberant features of the Pala School are the skilful and elegant use of lines, modelling forms by gentle and expressive variations of pressure, and the practice of the use of natural colours. The artists of this school used palm leaves and strips of cloth and arranged them in the form of a book. The intricate concepts and styles of the Pala School were taught in the Buddhist monasteries of Nalanda, Somapura Mahavihara, Odantapuri and Vikramasila. 'Bodhisattva Maitreya' and female incarnation of Buddha -

'Mamaki' with 'Vajra' on lotus from 'Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā' manuscript shown in Figures 4 and 5 respectively are the greatest examples. Overall, the Pala period (750 A.D. to the middle of the 12th century) witnessed the great phase of the Buddhist art in India [10-13, 16, 17].



Figure 4: Miniature Painting from Pala School – 'Bodhisattva Maitreya' from 'Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā' Manuscript [16].



Figure 5: Miniature Painting from Pala School - 'Mamaki with Vajra on Lotus' from 'Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā' Manuscript [17].

Jaina School of Miniature Painting



Figure 6: Miniature Painting from Jaina School - Miniature from 'Kalpasutra' on 'Mahavira Nirvana' [18].

Jainism influenced the rise of miniature paintings in western India. The period when this style of miniature painting gained fame was in the 11th century AD. The unique feature was the portrayal of figures with large eyes, square-shaped hands, and pointy noses. The main theme were male figures (Figure 6) and goddesses (Figure 7) of the Tirthankara. Often, heavily ornamented deities were depicted. Along with gold and silver, many other natural colours such as green, red, and blue were used. This was

the first school of miniature painting to switch from palm leaves to paper. It was prevailed in regions of Malwa, Rajasthan and Gujarat where religious texts like 'Kalpa Sutra' and 'Kalkacharya Katha' were depicted by these paintings. Figure 6 is the picture from 'Kalpasutra' folio on 'Mahavira Nirvana' and Figure 7 is a miniature of goddess from the Atmananda Jain Gnana Mandir, Baroda. The miniature paintings of this school began to decline during the late 16th century [10-13, 18, 19].



**Figure 7:** Miniature Painting from Jaina School – Goddess from the Atmananda Jain Gnana Mandir, Baroda [19].

### Mughal School of miniature painting



**Figure 8:** Miniature Painting from Mughal School - Akbar on an Elephant Hunt, an Illustration from the 'Akbarnama' [20].

This school flourished from 16th to 18th centuries AD and enjoyed a high status during the rule of Mughal Emperors like Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, and Shahjahan. The influence of Islamic and Persian culture was seen on the paintings of this period. Mughal paintings include scenes of royal court, hunting voyages, wildlife and battles. Plants and trees were painted in naturalistic style. The paintings had heavily decorated ironic frames. Since there were many emperors throughout the Mughal rule, the style and theme of the miniatures varied according to the ruler. Under Akbar's reign, royal achievements and court scenes were significant. Whereas Humayun and Jahangir chose scenes from their own lives to portray, and artists gave importance to portraiture during Shah Jahan's

time. This variation can be seen in the Figures 8-10. Figure 8 is an illustration from the 'Akbarnama', showing a scene of an elephant hunt in which Emperor Akbar chasing elephant Ran Bagha across the River Jumna; Figure 9 depicts a beautiful miniature painting portraying a scene in which Jahangir is weighing Prince Khurram against gold and silver; and Figure 10 is the portrait of Shahjahan. Hindu painters were also inspired by the Mughal style of paintings and they portrayed stories from 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata' in their miniatures. Figure 11 is the miniature painting showing a scene from Ramayana in which Ravana seizes Sita by the hair to abduct her to Lanka. This was the visualisation of Ramayana in the Mughal Paintings under Akbar's Patronage. Apart of these,

several paintings of that period reveal the groups of ascetics and mystics. Figure 12 is the painting of ascetics at Gurkhattri from the Baburnamah. Several illustrated manuscripts belonging to that time are also found. Figure 13 Page is a leaf from illustrated manuscript 'Razmnama', a Persian Mahabharata, portraying the scene in which Arjuna is slaying Karna during battle. Aurangzeb

ruined all the practices of art when he became the emperor. Later, Bahadur Shah Zafar attempted to revive this art of painting. Figure 14 is the painting of Bahadur Shah Zafar enthroned with last crown prince Mirza Fakhruddin. Unfortunately, he was failed to revive this art for long period and the Mughal School of miniature paintings was declined [10-13, 20-26].



**Figure 9:** Miniature Painting from Mughal School - Jahangir weighing Prince Khurram against Gold and Silver [21].



**Figure 10:** Miniature Painting from Mughal School - Portrait of Emperor Shah Jahan [22].



**Figure 11:** Miniature Painting from Mughal School –Ravana seizes Sita by the hair to abduct her to Lanka, a Scene from Ramayana [23].



Figure 12: Miniature Painting from Mughal School - Ascetics at Gurkhatti from the Baburnamah [24].



Figure 13: Miniature Painting from Mughal School – Page from Illusted Manuscript 'Razmnama', portraying Arjuna Slays Karna [25].

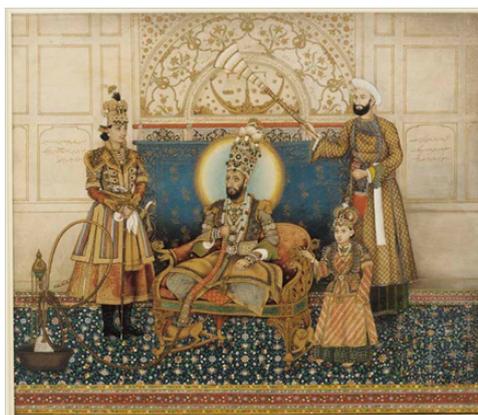


Figure 14: Miniature Painting from Mughal School - Bahadur Shah Zafar enthroned with Mirza Fakhruddin [26].

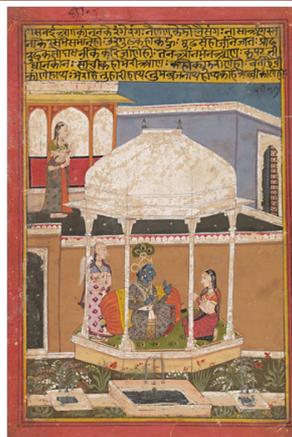
### Rajasthan School of miniature painting

It was the same time period when the Mughal School was declined, and Rajasthani School was raised. Like the Mughals, the Rajputs were also lovers of art, and the rulers gave encouragement and support to miniature paintings. Bhakti Movement of Medieval

India and Hinduism motivated and inspired this school of miniatures. Along with it, there was a great variety of other themes in Rajasthani miniatures like nature, seasons, royal life, hunting scene, love scene, music, ragmala series and beautiful depiction of women. The Rajasthani School of miniature paintings is classified into various

groups as according to the area like 'Mewar', 'Marwar', 'Hadoti' and 'Dhundar' sub-schools. The Mewar sub-school concentrated on its conservative style and avoided Mughal influence. This includes Chavand style, Nathdwara style, Devgarh style, Udaipur style and Sawar style of paintings. Figure 15 is the miniature portraying Krishna and Radha from a 'Rasikapriya' series in Udaipur style of Mewar sub-school. The Marwar sub-school later was to be highly influenced by Mughal flair and includes Kishangarh style, Bikaner style, Jodhpur style, Nagaur style, Pali style, and Ghanerao style of paintings. Figure 16 is the famous 'Bani Thani' painting in Kishangarh style from Marwar sub-school. Hadoti sub-school was also influenced by Mughal paintings and beautifully intertwined their characteristics into their own style. Kota style, Bundi style and Jhalawar style of paintings were included in this sub-school. Figure 17 is the miniature painting of a lady with peacock in Bundi style of Hadoti sub-school. The Dhundhar sub-school was known for its exclusive folk art paintings for which the artists took inspiration

from the Hadoti sub-school. This includes Amber style, Jaipur style, Shekhawati style and Uniara style of paintings. Figure 18 reveals the Rajasthani miniature painting in Jaipur style of Dhundar sub-school which is portraying a scene from Ramayana when Bharat comes to Chitrkut to meet Rama with his three mothers and Guru Vishwa Mitra. Various episodes have been shown in a single scene. Thus, there were distinct style of paintings related to different Rajputana Kingdoms but a few common features were also revealed like depiction of stories from the Ramayana and the royal life. Bold and contrast colours were used very frequently which were extracted from natural mediums like plants and minerals etc. The painting brushes were fine. Semi-precious and precious stones were used frequently to decorate the artwork. The art of miniature painting still exists in Rajasthan but in present scenario, painters generally portray paintings with artificial colours on paper, ivory and silk [10- 13, 27-33].



**Figure 15:** Miniature Painting from Rajasthan School – Krishna and Radha from a 'Rasikapriya' Series in Udaipur Style Miniature of Mewar Sub-school [30].



**Figure 16:** Miniature Painting from Rajasthan School – 'Bani Thani' Painting in Kishangarh Style from Marwar Sub-school [31].



**Figure 17:** Miniature Painting from Rajasthan School - A Lady with Peacock, in Bundi Style Miniature of Hadoti Sub-school [32].



**Figure 18:** Miniature Painting from Rajasthan School - A Scene of Bharat Milap from Ramayana in Jaipur Style Miniature of Dhundar Sub-school [33].

### Orissa School of miniature painting



**Figure 19:** Miniature Painting from Orissa School - Kṛiṣṇa and the Milkmaids from the 'Gita Govinda' [34].

This school was started in 17th century AD. The main depiction of these paintings is love stories of Lord Krishna and Radha and stories from 'Krishna Leela' and 'Gita Govinda'. For instance, Figure

19 is the illustrated manuscript page, portraying Lord Kṛiṣṇa and the milkmaid, from the 'Gita Govinda' of Jayadeva. Many of them also show incarnations of Lord Vishnu, for example, Figure 20

is showing the miniature of Matsya incarnation of Lord Vishnu. These paintings were rich in colour and often depicted the majestic landscape of the eastern parts of India. Typically very bold and

expressive strokes were used in paintings. These are mostly done on palm leaves [10-13, 34, 35].



**Figure 20:** Miniature Painting from Orissa School - Matsya Incarnation of Vishnu [35].

### Pahari School of miniature painting

This school was emerged in the 17th-19th century. It was distributed in the hilly kingdoms of North-Western India. This school of miniature paintings was influenced by the Mughal School and Rajput School. The practice of bold and contrasting colours shows the effect of the Rajasthani School, while heavily decorated frames and borders show the impact of the Mughal School. The miniature paintings of Pahari School are classified into various groups, such as 'Guler', 'Basohli', 'Garhwal', 'Chamba', 'Kangra' and 'Kullu-Mandi' sub-schools. Each group has its own distinct features and style of painting including the depiction of nature, architecture, figural types, facial features, costumes, preference

for particular colours and such other things. The Guler sub-school carried inspirations of Mughal miniatures, especially in its naturalism. Figure 21 is miniature portraying Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva seated on Lotuses with their consorts, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati respectively in Guler sub-school style. The Basohli sub-school seems least inspired by Mughal influence. Figure 22 is a miniature painting of Goddess Bhadrakali in Basohli sub-school style. The Mughal style was first dominant in Garhwal School. Later, it came to reflect a more straightforward interpretation of Kangra customs. Figure 23 is painting showing Krishna spurned by Radha in Garhwal sub-school style. Chamba paintings are quite similar in appearance to Mughal style of paintings, with strong influences of Deccan and Gujarat styles also. Figure 24



**Figure 21:** Miniature Painting from Pahari School - Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva seated on Lotuses with their consorts, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati respectively in Guler Sub-school Style of Miniature [37].



**Figure 22:** Miniature Painting from Pahari School - Goddess Bhadrakali in Basohli Sub-school Style of Miniature [38].



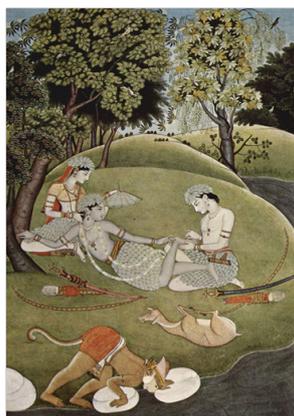
**Figure 23:** Miniature Painting from Pahari School - Krishna Spurned by Radha in Garhwal Sub-school Style of Miniature [39].



**Figure 24:** Miniature Painting from Pahari School – Descent of the Ganges in Chamba Sub-school Style of Miniature [40].

is a painting depicting descent of the Ganges in Chamba sub-school style. The Kangra style evolved as the sequel to the Guler style but in a very mature and complete manner. Figure 25 is miniature painting of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana in the forest in Kangra sub-school style. Kullu-Mandi sub-school was mainly inspired by the local tradition and flourished a folk style of paintings. Figure 26 is

the painting of from Bala Kand of 'Shangri Ramayana' portraying Rama and Lakshmana following sage Vishvamitra in Kullu-Mandi sub-school style. Thus apart of diversity, the most common features of Pahari School is the portrayal of gods and goddesses, the influence of Bhakti movement and the beauty of Himalayas was also a common scene in these paintings [10-13, 36- 42].



**Figure 25:** Miniature Painting from Pahari School – Rama, Sita and Lakshmana in the Forest in Kangra Sub-school Style of Miniature [41].



**Figure 26:** Miniature Painting from Pahari School – Rama and Lakshmana following Sage Vishvamitra, a Scene from Bala Kand of 'Shangri Ramayana' in Kullu-Mandi Sub-school style of Miniature [42].

### Deccan School of miniature painting



**Figure 27:** Miniature Painting from Deccan School – A Princess with her Friends in Hyderabad Sub-school Style of Miniature [43].

This school of miniature paintings was emerged in Hyderabad, Golconda, Tanjore, Ahmednagar, Bijapur and other nearby areas in 16th to 19th century A.D. The main characteristic feature of Hyderabad School was the Deccani facial types and costumes, however it was influenced by other styles also. Figure 27 is the painting of a princess with her friends in Hyderabad style. There was a profound impact of Iranian art on the Golconda miniature paintings. Figure 28 is a miniature painting of Chand Bibi playing polo in Golkonda style. In Tanjore paintings one can see the influence of Deccani, Vijayanagar, Maratha and even European or Company styles of painting. Figure 29 is the painting of Ganeashjanani in Tanjore style. Ahmadnagar paintings exhibited Persian influences. Figure 30 is the miniature form from 'Tarif-I-Husain Shahi' of queen with other females in Ahmednagar style. Bijapur paintings

were derived from the Persian tradition. Figure 31 is the miniature painting of the beautiful figure of yogini with bird in Bijapur style. Overall, Deccan School of miniature painting was influenced by the Iranian, Ottoman, Arabian and South Indian art culture. In fact, earlier the paintings were derived from the text of the Holy Quran and the Surahs. Later, indigenous art forms, romantic elements and Mughal styles were assimilated into this art form, so the paintings of this school depicted sensuous observing female figures with beautiful faces and large eyes with intense colours and it was its most striking feature of Deccan School of miniature paintings. Another distinguishing feature was buildings and other human-made structures showed in miniatures unlike customary figures. Also, symmetrical arrangement played a prominent role in these paintings. Bright colours were mainly used, and the multi-dimensional effect was created [10-13, 21, 43-47].



**Figure 28:** Miniature Painting from Deccan School – Chand Bibi Playing Polo in Golkonda Sub-school Style of Miniature [44].



**Figure 29:** Miniature Painting from Deccan School – Ganeshjanani in Tanjore Sub-school Style of Miniature [45].



**Figure 30:** Miniature Painting from Deccan School – Women Illustrated in 'Tarif-I-Husain Shahi' in Ahmednagar Sub-school Style of Miniature [46].



**Figure 31:** Miniature Painting from Deccan School – A Painting of Yogini in Bijapur Sub-school Style of Miniature [47].

## Conclusion

The tradition of miniature painting in India is expanded in the period of thousands of years. The wonderful miniatures of Pala, Jain, Mughal, Rajasthan, Orissa, Pahari and Deccan schools of miniature paintings are the evidence of this fact. Religion, philosophy, and faith are the most influential factors for Indian miniatures. Miniature paintings form a very significant facet of Indian culture, as they are important conveyor of times gone by. Also, all these schools of miniatures are a testament to the importance of art in Indian culture. At present, various museums and forts house these inimitable works of art. Therefore, through the study based on ancient miniature paintings, one can get special information about the culture concerned. Hence, these must be preserved and studied for both the aims – heritage collection and research purposes.

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## Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest

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