

PICTORIAL RETELLING OF DASAVATARA IN PATTACHITRA PAINTING

Rakesh Moharana

M.Phil Scholar, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack

Abstract: This paper will analyze different visual narratives in Pattachitra Painting tradition. Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* with particular reference to 'Dasavatara Stotra' will be used as a textual reference. Pattachitra and *Gita Govinda* are related each other as both mark their beginning and growth in Puri district of Odisha. Thus they have influenced each other through time. From its inception till present Pattachitra is mostly associated with *Gita Govinda* because of its themes; lord Jagannath, Radha Krishna and Dasavatara. The paper will concentrate on the analysis of structure and style of Pattachitra to determine its dynamism and narrativity in a static pictorial form through the audience's visual thinking and relishing of *Rasa*. It will use *Rasa* as its theoretical apparatus, which is an essential principle of Indian aesthetics on narratology and dramaturgy. This study will use Dasavatara Pattachitra painting as its central motif to discuss visual narratives in pictorial art.

Keywords: Pattachitra, *Rasa* Theory, Visual Thinking, Visual Culture.

Introduction: *Gita Govinda* has been a great source of literary and artistic inspirations throughout different modes of art, ranging from classical dances like Odishi, Manipuri, Bharatnatyam to indigenous folk dances, dance drama (*Gitinatya*), Odishi music and many schools of painting. In Odisha *Gita Govinda* is painted on paper or palm leaves and textile in a distinctive tradition known as *Pattachitra*. *Pattachitra* originally means *chitra* on *patta* or painting on cloth, but this has become an idiosyncratic style and so it has advanced to paper, palm leaves etc. The base may be different but the style remains the same. It has further revolutionised to manuscript illustrations and *Ganjhipa* playing cards etc.

Pattachitra is a school of painting having distinctive style, structure and framework that universalises it into a proper form of visual narrative application. It has a pictographic narrative structure (like that of Egyptian Hieroglyphics). One painting might tell one or more tales, depending upon its structure. Many times in temples these paintings are used to depict the whole timeline of gods and goddesses. In old times in villages, the paintings were combined with storytelling and singing for source of entertainment. These paintings had an appeal to everyone so that they could comprehend the *shastras* or scriptures through the paintings.

The paper concentrates on the analysis of structure and style of illustration of *Dasavatara* to determine its dynamism from a static pictorial form through the audience's visual thinking and relishing of *Rasa*. It will be studied using the theoretical frame work of *Rasa* theory which is an essential principle of narratology according to Indian Aesthetics. And it will also follow the argument of Rudolf Arnheim that a visual form is a visual concept, like any form of visual is a 'spiritus mundi', a collective soul of the universe containing the memories of all time. The analysis will be done on the illustration from *Gita Govinda*'s episode of *Dasavatara*. *Visual Thinking* by Rudolf Arnheim has been one of the oldest and the most influential work regarding Visual Culture. For years it has been the seminal book for teachers, psychologists, media students and visual study scholars. This book helped me to answer the main question of the research, to identify the dynamism in a static form of art like *Pattachitra*.

In this book he tries to form unity of perceiving and thinking. He further says that the essentials of thinking is the consequence of perception itself, thus there is no need of separate principle for them. They are just interrelated to each other. To support this proposition he argues that perceiving is a conscious activity where our basic intellect is required; books can be the ideal example of this proposition.

He opines that perception is an apprehensive study of patterns and structures. It is a kind of constructive and ongoing activity which has far beyond having no recollection of its origin in the first place. That means we not only possess the perception inherently but also the patterns and structures constructed out of them. Structures or patterns that our mind formulates are not just things that eyes copy and stores in mind. It is more of an ongoing and constructive phenomenon, which is stuck to our instinct. So the visual perception is instinctively

so is visual interpretation. The most important notion that feeds the argument is; perception is viewing the general through concrete and universal in the particular.

For an instance, he takes the example of our body; that we never able to see it entirely, at one moment we can only see a part of it. But our mind captures these partial images of our body and formulates a successive view of a single representation and makes us able to see each as a part of a whole.

Other effect of perception is transparency and constancy, which are treated similarly as a connection between perception and artistic representation. Like in a painting, a figure in action evokes the idea of the same object in motion, having temporality, despite is figure or the object is stationary or static. But our perception compels us to think these immovable patterns in motion. The current research is based on this very idea with an added concept of aesthetic theory of *Rasa*.

Rasa is the key to evaluate the narrative endeavours, so the visual narrative in Pattchitra painting tradition also follows the principle of *Rasa* expressing the *bhavas* or moods in the images. The narrative framework and emotive functions of *Rasa* experienced by the audience transmits frozen visual images into pictorial narrative. India has a great pictographic heritage, but words have always dominated images because of their explicit and descriptive nature. In the other hand images or paintings are subtle, implicit and tend to universalise its content. Pattachitra advances a mental harmony between the image and text from where the text is inspired. That is why it is arguable and agreeable that image implies the same fundamental components as that of the verbal or literal narration.

The renowned 'Dasavatara' Pattachitra painting (fig. 1) taken from *Gita Govinda* follows a traditional structure the painters used for ages. Like the incarnation is placed at the top and bottom part having the Krishna Radha in the centre in the erotic posture of *Rasa Leela*, covered with rich and intricate designs of foliage. The central part of the painting, (Radha and Krishna in erotic postures of *Rasa Leela*) depicts the first stanza of *Gita Govinda*, where despite darkness of the *Tamala*(Basil) forest, darkening of clouds and the command of Nanda to return home Radha and Krishna are lost in each other's embrace. This painting not just depicts the Dasavatara but rather the whole of *Gita Govinda*, the union of Radha and Krishna; the union of *Atma* and *Paramatma*. The painting indicates its structure expressing emotion through strong visualisation and neat patterns. This painting is almost black and white (yellow is added for the ornaments). In this painting the outlines are thickened with black colour so as the borders. And small decorative designs are painted in white.

As it is already mentioned earlier that the painting in question follows traditional principle of Pattachitra, most of the emotions or *Bhavas* are expressed through lines or strokes of eyes and postures of the figures. In most of the figures of Vishnu's incarnation illustrated in the painting like; *Matsya*, *Kurma*, *Varaha*, *Vamana* and Buddha it is found a similar kinds of facial expression and gestures through strokes. As these incarnations are direct embodiment of Vishnu himself (except Buddha and *Vamana*, they are more human in their appearance) which of '*shantaswabhava*' calm nature. And the '*shanta*'bhava or peace mood is the major one. If the figure of Vishnu is viewed, it can be noticed that he is all armed in his '*Chatur-Bhuja*' four arms (*Shankha* or the shell horn, the *Chakra*, *Gada* or the mace and *Padma* or the lotus) but his face is always so *shanta* or calm and composed; so peaceful. He is called *Kamalanayana* or lotus eyed for the reason is of this peaceful mien. In the figures of these incarnations the eyes, lips and face additionally the physical postures expresses peace and serenity. Especially in the figure of Buddha the peacefulness is more blatant, as he is in meditative *mudra* or posture and his figure is the only figure apart from the holy Trinity (Jagannath, Balabhdra and Subhadra) which is drawn front faced, according to the traditional Odiya principles Buddha is Jagannath as Sarala Das in *Mahabharat* has conceived Jagannath as the incarnation of Buddha. In some *Dasavatara* paintings Jagannath is painted in spite of Budhha, because of the supremacy of Jagannath Cult over artist reside in Puri.



Fig. 1 Gita Govinda Dasavatara Stotra Illustration

In the figures of Parsu Rama, Rama and Balarama, an expression of valour can be viewed from the stiff physical gestures and frowns on faces. The way they are geared up with their respective weapons (axe and Bow and arrow for Parsurama, bow and arrow for Rama and *Hala* or plough and mace for Balarama) along with their firm gesture and head held high creates a mood of valour or heroism; the mood or the *Rasa* of *Vira*. The figures of Parsurama and Rama are like mirror images to each other. Parsurama, who belongs to the clan of sages his attire and facial expression (*jataa* or bun and beard) shows a *vairagabhava* or saint mood but physical pose armed with axe and bow-arrow presents him as a warrior. With Rama, who is originally a warrior which is also there in this physical posture presents a '*vairagabhava*' due to attire and *Jatta*. In these three figures the mood of valour or heroism is the dominant one. So it depicts the *Rasa* of *Vira*.

Narasimha is the most ferocious incarnation of Vishnu. His figure in the painting is depicted with the classic *chatur-bhuja* (Four arms), all armed, bearing a face of a lion tearing a demon apart with his claws. In this figure the stroke of eyes are bit different; the pupil is small and floating in the middle of eyes not touching the sides, expressing wrath. Along with the physical posture which is ferocious too. These are expression of the *Raudra Rasa* or the *Rasa* of Wrath or Fury. Though it gives a mild mood of fear or *bhayabhava* and terrible or *bhayankara bhava* because the appearance of lion with opened mouth as if roaring but the dominant mood is Fury or *raudra*.

Conclusion: The figures in the painting are temporally frozen but the audience's mind move on. While the illustration appears to be motionless, our perception makes the leap and completes the narrative. It is due to this knack that the audience is convinced that the figures shown performing various actions are not merely people who look exactly the same engaged in various activities, but somehow the figures and their background tells a story associated with the audience's sociocultural belongings. This phenomenon takes place because people's imagination, unlike perception, is under the control of their will which is deeply influenced by their culture, society, custom etc. Thus from this analysis we not only see the structure and background of the

figures of the ten Incarnations but also visual thinking of these figures demonstrates the whole narrative pertaining to every figure.

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