

VISUALIZING BHAKTI: RASA, EMOTION, AND DEVOTION IN THE MURAL PAINTINGS OF AYODHYA

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ABSTRACT

One of the most sacred, populist, prosperous and historically religious centers of North India, the aesthetic traditions of Ayodhya were shaped by local rulers, nawabs, merchants and religious leaders. Although its archaeological excavations and multi-layered religious narratives have been extensively studied, the city's murals present an untouched repository of visual emotions, a unique synthesis of classical aesthetics, indigenous artistic traditions and external cultural exchanges.

The aim of this paper is to unravel the aesthetics of Rasavada, classicism and symbolism prevalent in the murals of Nawabi and colonial periods of Ayodhya through art-historical analysis and explore how these murals evolve from the aesthetic traditions of Rasavada to create a visual poetry or world of emotions that combines devotion, love, narrative and artistic expression. By critically examining and analyzing the murals preserved in various shrines and temples of Ayodhya, this study examines the stylistic and thematic aspects of the murals and situates them in the context of other regional artistic and cultural traditions, within the broader painting traditions of North India. Underlining local folk traditions and regional specificity, this paper examines how the depiction of episodes from sacred narratives such as Ramayana, Bhagavata Purana, Ramcharitmanas and Krishna Lila reflect emotional experiences, local and regional aesthetic traditions.

Through ornate creepers, decorative motifs, pairs of animals and birds, divine colours, bhava-bhangima (body language) and compositional rhythms, these murals depict the divine love of Rama, Sita and Radha, the heroic rasa in the scenes of exile and suffering and the devotional rasa in the acts of devotion, transforming the walls of the temple into an aesthetic realm with multi-layered emotions. By incorporating Dr. B. N. Goswamy's legacy of studying miniature painting, mural painting and aesthetics in the study of mural paintings of Ayodhya, this essay extends his methodological insights and art historical analysis. It argues that the murals of Ayodhya exhibit a distinct advanced form of classicism as a hybrid visual language, which should be recognized as concrete visual texts rather than as decorations, where the language of rasa mediates between the soul and the divine, man and nature and devotee and God. Thus, this paper highlights the role of rasaism and aesthetics as a reading of visual traditions and shaping sacred emotional experiences.

Keywords: Ayodhya, mural painting, rasa, bhakti, visual culture

INTERRELATION OF BHAKTI AND RASA

In Indian religious art, the experience of devotion is not limited to simply being present before an image of a deity. Images, colors and stories also establish a connection between the devotee and the deity. Wall paintings make this connection even more powerful, turning an entire wall of a religious place into a visual environment. When visitors enter the temple, they see not just an image but a religious world filled with innumerable scenes, colors and symbols.

This is where the concept of Rasa¹ connects with the experience of devotion. The feeling of adornment can be seen in the love of Radha-Krishna or Ram-Sita; compassion in scenes of exile, isolation and conflict; bravery in war and protection of religion; And quiet devotion to God and spiritual concentration. Thus, the same religious narrative in the murals of Ayodhya gives rise to the possibility of multiple rasas.

This connection between devotion and rasa makes the art of Ayodhya broader than just religious painting. Here the painting not only informs the audience about a religious event but also involves them emotionally in that event. For example, a devotee witnessing Rama's exile does not merely witness a past event; They may connect with feelings of abandonment and isolation. Similarly, the scene of Rama's coronation evokes a collective feeling of joy, pride and auspiciousness.

ROLE OF COLOR, LINE AND POSTURE

The use of color is a major means of creating emotion in the murals of Ayodhya. Colors like red, yellow, green, blue and white are not just for decorative purposes; They define the atmosphere of the scene. Red can evoke a feeling of energy, celebration or power, while blue or dark colors are associated with divinity and solemnity. Yellow and golden color creates an atmosphere of purity and auspiciousness.

Lines also have equal importance in expressing emotions. The lines demarcating shapes are sometimes hard and firm, while others are soft and flowing. The mental state of the characters is expressed through body posture and hand position. For this reason, emotions have great importance in Indian art. A bowed head may symbolize humility, raised hands may indicate power or command, and two bodies leaning toward each other may indicate love and closeness.

Rasa is a fusion of word and meaning, that bathes the minds of readers, with savor of bliss.

It is the truth of poetry, shining without cessation. Clear to the heart, it is yet beyond the words.
— Hrsikesa

The use of facial expressions and eyes also adds to the emotional power of the Ayodhya frescoes. The direction of the eyes determines who the character is interacting with. A devotee's gaze is directed towards the deity, the deity's gaze is directed towards the devotee, or a character's gaze is directed towards a distant event – all of these create an internal dialogue of emotions within the painting.

DECORATION, NATURE AND THE SYMBOLIC WORLD

Veil-like patterns, flowers, trees, birds and animals often appear in the frescoes of Ayodhya. These embellishments should not be seen as mere space-filling decorations. They expand the

emotional world of painting. In love scenes, the presence of flowers and vines soften the atmosphere, while in forest-related scenes, trees and natural scenes deepen the characters' experiences.

Pairs of birds, peacocks, swans and other creatures are often used as symbols of love, beauty and nature. Thus, a visual connection is established between man and nature. The characters of religious narratives do not exist in an empty background, but are situated in a world in which architecture, flora, fauna and ornamentation all become part of their experience.

This feature makes the frescoes of Ayodhya multi-layered. A single painting can be read on many levels – religious narrative, local culture, decorative tradition and emotional experience. Therefore, to describe these paintings merely as decoration of temple walls would be to limit their artistic and cultural significance.

CLASSICISM AND REGIONALISM IN THE PAINTING OF AYODHYA

The question of classicism in the frescoes of Ayodhya is very interesting. Here classical tradition does not mean repetition of a certain style. Rather, it is the presence of those principles of form-setting, narrative-building, emotional expression and beauty, which have been developing in Indian artistic traditions for a long time. Along with this, local artists also include their regional traditions and visual experiences in their paintings.

Cultural contacts of the Nawabi and colonial periods also influenced the visual world of Ayodhya. The mutual influence of different artistic traditions can be seen in clothing, architecture, ornamentation and painting. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to understand the murals of Ayodhya as a mixed visual language. This language is neither strictly courtly, nor exclusively folk artistic, nor confined to any one religious tradition.

Dr. B.N. Taking inspiration from Goswami's artistic vision, it is necessary to read these paintings in their form, subject and cultural context. A painting is not defined solely by its subject; The vision of the artist, workshop tradition, patron class, religious environment and local society also work behind this. This multidimensional approach may prove particularly useful in the study of the wall paintings of Ayodhya.

CASE STUDIES OF THE MURALS OF AYODHYA

On looking carefully at the paintings painted on the walls of the temples of Ayodhya, it becomes clear that here the painter does not just describe a religious story, but also emphasizes a special feeling within each scene. The images of Rama, Sita, Shiva, Parvati, Krishna, gopis and Hanuman in the wall paintings of Tiwari Temple and Bhikusha Temple acquire their meaning through various rasas. In these paintings, along with the local painting tradition, the influence of Rajasthani, Pahari and naturalistic painting trends is also visible.

1. Ram and Sita in Pushpa Vatika

The scene of Ram and Sita depicted in the Pushpa Vatika or garden is a very beautiful expression of Shringara Rasa in the painting tradition of Ayodhya. In this type of painting, the love between two characters is not displayed in any direct or violent way, but through gaze, posture and the natural environment created around them. The figures of Ram and Sita are often seen facing each

other. The flowers, trees and creepers present among them further enhance the feeling of love that has been associated with gardens in Indian poetry and painting.



Here nature is not just the background. Tree branches, flowering vines, birds, and the landscaped grounds become extensions of the characters' emotions. Like Rajasthani painting, ornamental trees and bright colors give a festive look to the scene, while the influence of Pahari painting can be felt in the softness of the figures and their emotional connection with nature. At some places, a trend towards naturalness is also visible in the facial structure and body proportions.

This picture of Ram and Sita is not just a scene of marital love. It is a combination of sacred love, dignity and beauty. That is why here Shringaar Rasa is not limited to worldly love and acquires spiritual meaning.

2. Shiva and Parvati: Union of Purusha and Prakriti

The frescoes of Shiva and Parvati show the harmony of two different powers. Shiva symbolizes penance, renunciation and stillness, while Parvati is the embodiment of nature, creation and the movement of life. When the painter depicts these two together, he not only presents a portrait of husband and wife, but also a visual representation of two interrelated elements of the universe.

In these paintings, the soft and adorned figure of Parvati creates a special visual contrast against the serious posture of Shiva. This conflict eventually turns into harmony. The simple or ascetic presence of Shiva in front of Parvati's jewellery, clothes and beauty makes the picture meaningful. The influence of Rajasthani tradition is visible in the clothes, jewelery and decorative borders here. On the other hand, the delicacy of Pahari painting can be seen in the facial expressions and mutual expressions of Shiva and Parvati.



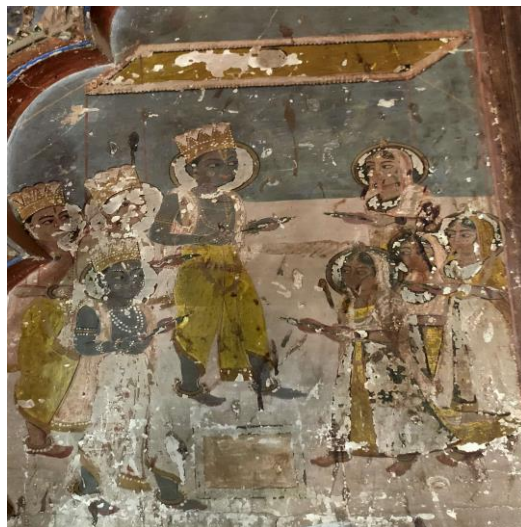
These paintings can also be read as a relationship between man and nature. Without Shakti, Shiva is inactive and without Shiva, Shakti is uncontrolled. Therefore, the union of the two symbolizes the completeness of creation. Along with makeup, a sense of peace is also present in this scene. Here love is not just attraction, but the union of power and consciousness.

3. Radha, Gopis and Krishna: Collective make-up and the game of love

In the religious paintings of Ayodhya, the murals related to Krishna, Radha and Gopis present a different world of love and devotion. In the scene created keeping Krishna in the center, the figures of Radha and Gopis create many layers of emotions all around. Some gopis have their eyes on Krishna, some are in musical or dance postures, while some express a feeling of waiting and separation.

Here Shringaar Rasa is not individual but takes a collective form. Krishna's charm provides a center to the entire scene. The movement of the Gopis' bodies, the rhythm of their clothes and the circular or rhythmic picture-composition create movement in the scene. In such paintings, the decorative color scheme of Rajasthani painting and the shine of clothes can be clearly felt. The Pahari influence is visible in the softness of the figures and the intensity of emotion that transforms love into a spiritual experience.

Love and devotion do not remain separate from each other in the relationship between Krishna and Radha. Radha's love becomes surrender and the attraction of the Gopis takes the form of the devotee's desire for God. In this way, visual adornment starts from pleasure and moves towards devotion.



4. Hanuman and Ram: Bhakti Rasa

The scene of Hanuman and Rama is one of the strongest expressions of devotion in the wall paintings of Ayodhya. Hanuman's presence here holds both power and humility. His body may be strong, but his posture remains surrendered before Ram. This contradiction characterizes his character – immense strength and complete humility.

In the picture, if Hanuman is shown with folded hands near the feet of Ram or looking at him with a concentrated gaze, then this scene expresses the feeling of devotion. Here Ram becomes not just a king or a hero, but a worshipper. Hanuman's body and face become a direct expression

of his inner devotion.

In this type of painting, the influence of both Rajasthani and Pahari traditions can be seen at different levels. The decorative clarity of line and color points to Rajasthani influence, while the emotional softness inherent in the faces and eyes is reminiscent of the Pahari painting tradition. The relationship between Hanuman and Ram does not allow this picture to remain just a mythological story; It becomes a direct form of relationship between the devotee and God.

Devotion is the main element here and the whole picture seems to be organized around it.



CONCLUSION

The wall paintings of Ayodhya are an important but relatively little studied tradition of Indian religious art. Along with story and devotion, these paintings also contain deep aesthetic experience. The theory of rasa provides a useful means of reading these murals, as through it the emotions such as love, compassion, bravery, peace and dedication present in the paintings can be understood more deeply.

In these frescoes devotion does not take the form of a passive religious feeling, but becomes an active experience through sight, color, body, narrative and memory. Rama, Sita, Krishna, Radha and Hanuman depicted on the wall do not appear before the viewer merely as religious characters; They enter the viewer's consciousness through emotion. Thus, the painting creates a visual bridge between the devotee and the deity.

Therefore, the wall paintings of Ayodhya cannot be ignored by considering them as mere old religious decorations. They preserve within them an important history of the painting traditions, local aesthetics, religious memory and emotional culture of North India. Their detailed documentation, conservation and art-historical study is necessary. A study based on rasa and bhakti can place this visual tradition of Ayodhya in a new and more serious place in the broader history of Indian art.

These paintings on the walls of Ayodhya ultimately tell us that religious art is not just something to behold. It is also a process of experiencing, remembering and connecting with the divine through emotions. In this sense, the wall paintings of Ayodhya are a visual poetry – where colors become language, gestures become emotions and devotion becomes part of the viewer's experience.

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