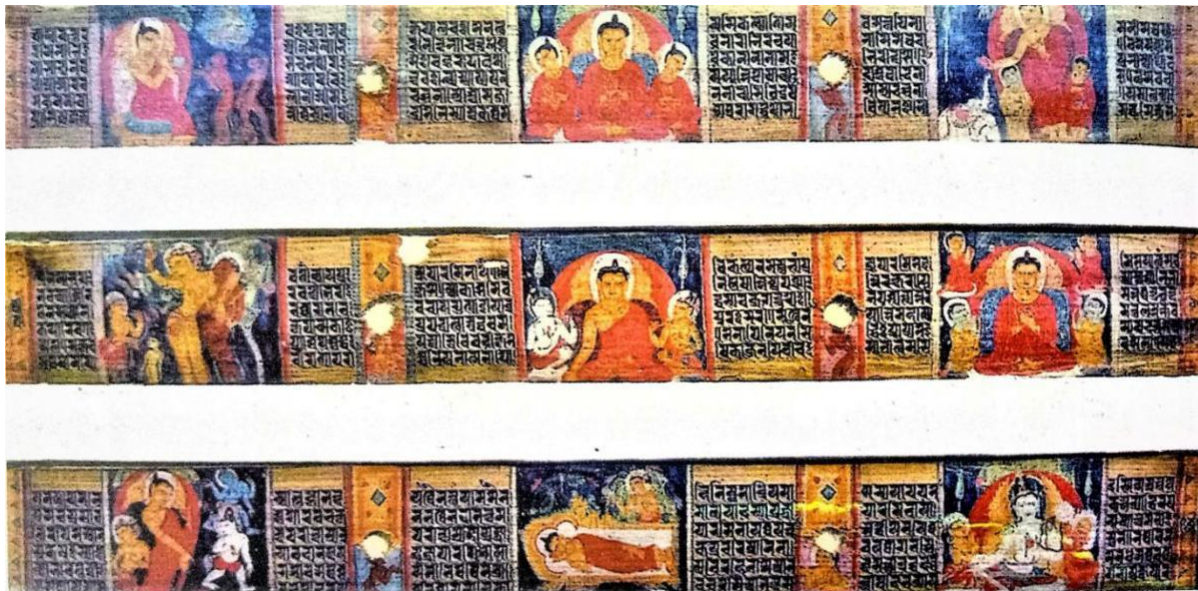


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## “Commonality of Bharatiya Tradition and Art – with Reference to the Story of Shibi and Megharatha”

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### **Abstract**

The religions art in Indian context go hand in hand and virtually the religions thought and concept find visual expressions in different forms of art architecture, sculpture icon, Painting and also fine arts. These contexts mostly are the vehicle of the principal ideas of spirituality, absolute renunciation and austerity. The principle of Ahimsa is the central to the religious of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The ancient principle of Ahimsa had a performed impact on Indian thought and civilization over the millennia, and it continuous to influence the world today.

The commonality of the story Shivi lies in the core spirit of Indian culture in which Ahimsa become tool to save the lives of someone seeking shelter. In the story of Shivi or Megharatha the ruler in all the traditional is Chakravartin and assured to save the life of a pigeon from the threat of falcon. The narrative of the story is found in the Buddhist Jataka, Mahabharata and the Jaina Tradition. Although the narrative depiction in Vedik-Puranic context is rarely found. Buddhist tradition takes lead in its visual rendering which are found at Sunga Period Bharhut.

On the other hand, in Jaina tradition the textual reference and the visual depictane are found at Shvetamber Jain sites of Western India.

The scenes pertaining to Shantinatha-carita is carved in the western bay ceiling of the Shantinatha and Mahavira temple of Kanbari. Shibi-Jataka found from Gandhara and dateable to first-second century. Shibi-jataka is carved on Buddhist stupa of Barobadur (Java), Indonesia in 9<sup>th</sup> century AD.

The scenes in the ceiling of Mahavira temple, Kubhariya are also divided into crucified boxes, but here the episode of Megharatha is not shown. A subsequent example of mid 12<sup>th</sup> century AD showing identical scene though it is not shown any detailed in the ceiling of Vimala-Vasahi.

As in the above reference we should note that the stories of King Shivi in Brahmanical and Buddhist traditional and that of Megharatha in Jaina tradition are identical. There are several other such stories and episodes, which reveal the commonality and assimilation having some distinctive features as we have the present story of “Shivi and Megharatha”. Though the entire story the core spirit of Non-violence and serving the life of the ‘Sharanagata’ are boldly projected.

**Key words:** ‘Sharanagata’, ‘Ahimsa’ ‘Shvetamber’, ‘Puranic’, ‘Austerity’, ‘Commonality’, ‘Shelter’.

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## Introduction

The earliest art of India originated from a religious Hindu background which was later replaced by a serving popular Buddhist art. Moreover, from a timeless era art in India has been inspired by spiritualism and mystical relationship between man and god. Art in India had survived in its homeland and spread from time to time all over the world. This was possible because of namely kings has left a deep impression of his affinity to the comity of art work until today, art is patronized by the wealthiest section of the society. Indian artist relied heavily on religious scriptures to draw inspiration. Art also symbolized the prosperity of many empires in ancient India most of the art was produced to promote religious activities. The Indian art teaches us harmony and unity and diversity. Being a land of multiple cultures, religion, ethics etc., Indian live together peacefully with each individual following their belief.

The present paper aims at discussing a rare episode, which is commonly found in all the three traditions (Vaidik-Puranic, Buddhism and Jainism) and which originated from the **Mahabharata** (*Vana-parva*, 131. 1-31).

The main objectives of the present study are:-

1. How the traditional story makes a trend for other traditions and becomes core of Indian culture.
2. What message is transmitted through art depictions? Usually such core spirits of non-violence and truth become the Pan-Indian and Pan-Religious concept.
3. Through the study we shall try to underline how a concept or trend, shared by all cults, becomes model of social-ethical ideals and values?

The commonality of the story of the Shibi lies in the core spirit of Indian culture in which *Ahimsa* (non-violence) becomes tool to save the life of someone, seeking shelter (refuge - *Sharana*) [fn.1]. In the story of Shibi or Megharatha (in Jaina context) the ruler in all the traditions is *Cakravartin* and assured to save the life of a pigeon (dove, some god in disguise) from the threat of falcon. The narration of this story is first found in the **Mahabharata** and then in the Buddhist *Jataka* (**Shibi-Jataka**) in early centuries of Common Era. Thereafter the story was assimilated in Jaina tradition as early as 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century CE. Although the narrative depiction in Vaidik-Puranic context is rarely found (perhaps to be seen on Hoyasala temples) yet Buddhist tradition takes lead in its visual renderings, which are early, found from Shunga period (first-second century BCE onwards) at Bharhut.

However in Buddhist tradition also we have the identical story of Shibi mentioned in **Shibi-Jataka** with two different stories. The first story exactly follows the story of **Mahabharata**, while the second story does not refer to saving life of pigeon from falcon but mentions about the liberal donation made by Shibi, who also donated his eyes (*netra-dana*), highlighting his *Dana-vritti* [fn.2]. The depiction of the Buddhist story is found as early as second century BCE at Bharhut (M.P.) followed by Amaravati, Nagarjunikonda (Andhra-

Pradesh), Gandhara (first-second century CE, fig. 04) and Ajanta (5<sup>th</sup> century CE, Maharashtra). Interestingly its representation in Buddhist context is found also on Buddhist *stupa* of Borobudur (Java, Indonesia, 9<sup>th</sup> century CE, fig. 04), which is important since it shows the extension of the common story of Shibi outside India.

On the other hand, in Jaina tradition the textual references and the visual depictions are found from 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards, mainly at Shvetambara Jaina sites of Western India. Now we take up detailed study of story of *Cakravartin* Megharatha in Jaina tradition, who was destined to take birth as 16<sup>th</sup> Jina Shantinatha. The name and the cognizance deer of Jina Shantinatha are suggestive of *Shanti* (Peace) which is the ultimate objective of human life and which could be experienced through *Ahimsa* and *Sharanagata-bhava*. Its comparison with earlier tradition of **Mahabharata** and also the tradition of Buddhist **Jatakas (Shibi-Jataka)** hint at the element of commonality in all the traditions.

The 16<sup>th</sup> Tirthankara Shantinatha in his previous existence as *Cakravartin* ruler Megharatha became the epitome of compassion and non-violence by offering his own flesh to save the life of a pigeon (*kapota*). This episode is mentioned at length in the Jaina works namely the **Trishashtishalakapurusacaritra** (5.4.253-322) of Hemacandra Suri (12<sup>th</sup> century CE), **Shri Shantinatha Caritra** of Bhavacandra Suri (14<sup>th</sup> century CE) and **Shri Shantinatha Caritra** of Acarya Ajitaprabha Suri (in form of manuscript, latter half of 14<sup>th</sup> century CE) [fn.3] and which was represented in the narrative art found at the important Jaina sites of 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> century CE namely Kumbhariya (Shantinatha temple, Banaskantha, Gujarat, 11<sup>th</sup> century CE, fig. 01) and Delvada (Vimala-Vasahi, Mt. Abu, Rajasthan, mid 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, fig. 02) [fn.4]. The present study aims at probing into how and with what socio-religious objectives this particular episode of the life 16<sup>th</sup> Jina Shantinatha was assimilated in Jainism from the **Mahabharata** (1000 BCE) in 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. The name of the ruler in **Mahabharata** was Shibi, who stood for the cause of saving the life of pigeon from the threat of falcon by way of offering his body to pacify its hunger. The falcon did specifically ask for the flesh from the body of the *Maharaja* Shibi [fn.5], while in Jaina texts the falcon said that it eats only the meat (*Mansa*), therefore in place of pigeon it should be provided with human flesh equal to weight of pigeon [fn.6].

The detailed story of king Megharatha is given in the **Trishashtishalakapurusacaritra**. It shows that as Megharatha *Cakravartin* he earned merit by way of following the highest ideals of *Ahimsa* (*sharanagata-bhava*) [fn.7]. The text says that once Indra in his *deva-sabha* was praising the religious practices (*Dharmacaraṇa*) of Megharatha. On this the god Surupa wanted to test the religious merit of Megharatha and entered the body of a pigeon, who was fleeing from a falcon to save his life. The pigeon came to the lap of king Megharatha and requested for saving his life from the falcon, which was chasing the pigeon. Naturally the falcon also came after a while and asked to give him the pigeon, because he was hungry. On this what Megharatha said was very important that to save the life of someone taking refuge was the *Kshatriya-Dharma*. Megharatha further asked the falcon to take milk and something else in place of pigeon. Megharatha also preached the falcon to follow the path of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and keep himself away from the killing [fn.8]. But since falcon and pigeon were part of test to the *Dharmacaraṇa* of Megharatha,

falcon said ‘I am in the habit of eating the meat of birds and animals’ [fn.9]. Then Megharatha offered to give the flesh of his body equal to the weight of the pigeon to pacify his hunger [fn.10]. The king immediately ordered for a balance and started taking out his own flesh and putting it on the scale against the weight of the pigeon. But the god Surupa in pigeon’s body went on to increase its weight till Megharatha decided to offer whole of his body by putting himself in the scale. Then the god in the pigeon appeared and blessed Megharatha who was born as Shantinatha in his next birth. [fn.11]. Almost the same story is mentioned in other two Jaina texts (the **Shri Shantinatha Caritra** of Bhavacandra Suri and the **Shri Shantinatha Caritra** of Acarya Ajitaprabha Suri).

In art depictions, the verbal story is represented in brief and capsule form in which the suggestion of the story is given which helps in identifying the entire narrative depictions in the ceilings showing the *Panchakalyanakas* of the Tirthankara. The *Panchakalyanakas* include the descend of the soul of the Jinas from the heaven into the wombs of their respective mothers (*cyavana*), birth (*janma*), initiation into ascetic life (*diksha*), attainment of omniscience (*kevala-jnana*) and the emancipation (*nirvana*). These five auspicious events occurred in the life of each of the 24 Jinas and hence find invariable representations in all the instances of the narrative scenes in the Western Indian Jaina temples [fn.12]. On the basis of the figures of balance (*tula*) in the examples from Kumbhariya (Shantinatha temple, fig. 01) and Delvada (Vimala-Vasahi, fig. 02) and on its one side the figure of pigeon while on other side human figure of Megharatha, the same could be identified with the episode of Megharatha and hence with previous life of Shantinatha.

The scenes pertaining to *Shantinatha-carita* is carved in the western bay ceilings of the Shantinatha and Mahavira temples of Kumbhariya. Besides the usual auspicious events, the episode from his previous existence as king Megharatha is also carved in Shantinatha temple. According to the Shvetambara tradition, king Megharatha weighed his body against a pigeon to save the latter’s life. The scene in the Shantinatha temple (fig. 01) as usual is divided into three rectangular boxes. The outermost *pattika* on west shows Shantinatha in his previous existence as king Megharatha, sitting in a pavilion in the midst of dancers, musicians and warriors. Further ahead is shown a *tula* showing the figure of Megharatha on one side and the pigeon on the other [In one of the panels, presently in British Museum, London, showing **Shibi-Jataka** found from Gandhara (fig. 03) and datable to first-second century CE, who balance is shown and on its right side a pigeon appears while on left side Bodhisattva is standing in spirit of weighing his whole body. Another interesting example of **Shibi-Jataka** is carved on Buddhist *stupa* of Borobudur (Java, Indonesia, 9<sup>th</sup> century CE, fig 05), in which balance is shown and on left side pigeon sits while on its right side Bodhisattva is preparing himself to weigh his body as demanded by falcon]. Thus it represents the moments when Megharatha offered the whole of his flesh to save the life of a pigeon from a falcon. The story narrates that god Surupa entered the body of a pigeon who was fleeing from a falcon to test the steadfastness of kind hearted Megharatha. The scenes in the ceilings of Mahavira temple, Kumbhariya are also divided into crucified boxes; but here the episode of Megharatha is not shown. The scenes are being labelled [fn.13]. A subsequent example of mid 12<sup>th</sup> century CE showing identical scene, though not so detailed, is found in the ceiling of Vimala-Vasahi (cell no. 12, Delvada, fig. 02) [fn.14].

Thus in conclusion we should note that the stories of king Shibi in Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions and that of Megharatha in Jaina tradition are identical. There are several other such stories and episodes, which reveal the commonality and assimilation having some distinctive features as we find in case of present story in respect of its literary references and visual renderings. The story undoubtedly first appears in the **Mahabharata**, which was subsequently followed in other traditions. The story has three main characters the king who was kind hearted, the pigeon (god in disguise) and falcon. Through the entire story the core spirit of non-violence and saving the life of the *Sharanagata* are boldly projected. However, the earliest depiction of this story is found in Buddhist art. In Jaina literature and art it appears only during 11<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> century CE and onwards.

**References:-**

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12. Maruti Nandan Prasad Tiwari, **Praci-Prabha**, p. 362
13. **Ibid**, pp. 366-368.
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**List of Illustrations:-**



*Narratives from the life of Shantinatha showing also the episode of Megharatha saving life of a pigeon, aisle ceiling, Shantinatha temple, Kumbharia (Banaskantha, Gujarat), 11<sup>th</sup> century CE.*



*Narratives of Shantinatha, devakulika no. 12, aisle ceiling, Vimala-Vasahi (Delvada), Mt. Abu (Rajasthan), mid 12<sup>th</sup> century CE.*