

## Three Paintings of Agni Pariksha

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### Abstract

The confrontation of Sita, the heroine of the Ramayana epic, with fire is one of the most dramatic episodes of this story. This episode has had various reflections in various art forms. In the manuscripts decorated with paintings from the story of Ramayana, we can see many examples of this scene. In this article, three examples of paintings related to the story of Agni Prakash are examined in terms of form and content, two copies from the Indian Mughal court and one example from the Hindu court.

**Keywords:** *Ramayana, Sita, Agni Parksha, Indian manuscripts, Mughal painting, miniature painting*

### Introduction

Based on the epic Ramayana, Sita, who is the second hero in this story and Rama's wife, faces a major challenge. She, who was a clear example of a faithful wife during her captivity in Lanka, is now faced with people's slander and her name and reputation are seriously threatened. Tradition places a difficult way in front of her, and it is a test in which she is exposed to fire. If she gets out of this safe and proud test, it can put a false stamp on the satirical and useless words around her. This tradition, which weighs more heavily upon women than men, is given to Sita this time, who after enduring exile in the forest, then being captive and being away from her husband, has to face a very dangerous test. But she, who is sure of her purity and integrity, gives in to it with the utmost calmness and without any complaint. The harsh and rigid traditions that weigh heavily on Indian women at last provide Sita as a shining example of a tolerant, noble and honest woman.

This episode of the Ramayana was reflected in many Indian paintings in various artistic styles and is always a matter of concern to painters. In this paper, three images from old Indian manuscripts dedicated to the representation of this event of the Ramayana are examined. Two paintings related to Mughal and one related to Mewar styles were chosen. These paintings are examined and compared at both form and content levels.

### Mughal Ramayana Manuscripts

As for attempts to produce artwork, Mughal Empire of India (1526-1857) was prominent in art history. The well-established style of Persian miniature painting they introduced to India by inviting Persian masters to their workshops, developed and mixed with more realistic local approaches and left a bright style of painting in the history of art that is known as Mughal painting.

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The outstanding policy of creating a religious tolerance environment and dialogue between the different religions established by most Mughal emperors, especially Akbar, provided a platform for translation of the sacred books of other religions as well as the Islamic sacred and historical books. Among these efforts, some Hindu sacred books such as the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana* were translated into the official language of the Mughal court Persian. These translations were presented in splendid manuscripts decorated with numerous miniature paintings.

The third Mughal Emperor, Akbar, ordered translation of the Ramayana in late 16<sup>th</sup> century. After the production of the first copy for himself, two other copies were produced; one for the Emperor's mother Hamīda Bānū Begum and the other one by his vizier Abd al-Raḥīm Khān-i- Khānān.

The strong influence of Rāmāyana was so strong that Emperor Akbar's mother, Hamīda Bānū, thought of herself as a personification of Sītā, a symbol of loyalty and devotion who accompanied her husband Humāyūn during their sojourn in Safavid court (York Leach, 1998: 41). Even Akbar could have considered himself a personification of Ram, such an ideal king and thereby placing emphasis on his authority in his realm (Gandhi, 2009).

The manuscript has three hundred and sixty-five folios with 176 miniatures without any mention of the scribe. The date of completion is recorded as 28 Dhu al-Ḥijjah, 997 A.H (November 6<sup>th</sup> 1589) (Das, 1994: 74).

The general forms of the paintings (Akbar copy) follow the Persian Safavid standards of idealized and abstract scenes, although the touch of Indian realism can also be seen within the paintings.

The Abd al- Raḥīm's copy of the *Rāmāyana* completed in 1007/1598-99 with an indication of Mullā Shakībī- an Iranian born scholar- as the supervisor of the project (Seyller, 1986). The manuscript that now stands at the Freer Art Gallery has 130 miniatures, although on one occasion it was mentioned by Abd al-Raḥīm that it originally came with 135 paintings (Seyller, 1999: 73).

The general formal feature of the paintings in this copy is related to the mature Mughal style with an extensive Indian appearance and some European influences (Von Folsach, 1996: 347). As Seyller (1999) suggests, in general there is a delicate and sensible attitude employed in composition, formulation and accomplishment of the paintings.

However, further in his allusion when attempts to present a detailed view of works, he mentions certain irregularities and negligence committed by painters or who were responsible for the entire project. This might be to some extent because of the involvement of different artists with different religious backgrounds and drawing, a fact which is observable in other Mughal miniatures as well (Ibid).

### **Rana Jagat Singh's Ramayana**

This copy of the Ramayana was executed in Udaipur between 1649 and 1652 at the court of Rana Jagat Singh (1628-1652). Since the rulers of Mewār were asserting their lineage to the Sun and more specifically to Rama himself, the commissioning of this large project may also be considered a glorification of their family history (British Library, 2013).

The work was initially carried out in seven volumes with more than 400 paintings. Five volumes are now in the British Library and two others (Books 1&3) are preserved in India – book 1 in Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai, and book 3 in Rājāsthān Oriental Research Centre, Udaipur. The British Library brought together 370 paintings for use by researchers. Since the four volumes of this work were owned by the British Library at the auction of the Sussex collection in 1844, it is also known as Sussex Rāmāyana.

Dr. Daljeet identified two series of the Rāmāyana manuscripts produced in Mewār, one in 1648 illustrated by Mānohar and another in 1651 (Dr. Daljeet 2002: 23). It seems that the first set he mentioned must have been this codex presented here as the Rana Jagat Singh's Rāmāyana, while he states the apparent similarities between the two (ibid.).

The manuscript was initially unbound according to the traditional Indian format and those loose leaves acquired by British Museum were inlaid into proper heavy papers for the sake of preservation (British Library, 2013).

### **Comparison of the three paintings**

In this part, three paintings of the same episode, Agni Pariksha, from three manuscripts of the Ramayana are selected.

The painting of Akbar Ramayana is filled with people in which its main character- Sita-though not completely, is somehow located in the center. The figures wear clothes of solid color, while a feeling of shade can be seen applied in the sky, fire and somehow the hills by the use of touches of color and stains.

In Abd al-Rahim's copy, much of the work is occupied with the text panel. Sita crouches on the left edge of the scene while Rama and Lakshmana with their companions is held in the bottom half of the picture. This painting is divided into two separate horizontal compartments, at the top of the zone in which Sita is experiencing the ordeal of fire and at the bottom of the zone in which Rama and his assistants are gathered and contemplate the event. Rama is represented in blue skin and with other noblemen have put high crowns on their heads. The scene also includes a number of animals and rakshasas.

Figures 1 and 2 were produced by the Mughal workshop, but there are two nearly different approaches. Figure 1 of the Jaipur manuscript (Akbar manuscript) is busier than Figure 2 in terms of the number of people depicted in the painting.

**Rana Jagat Singh's Version**

Mewar's copy of this scene (Figure 3) shows Sita's placement in a circle whereas the God of fire – Agni- has embraced her and the overall scene is not very simple but is complicated.

It is a multi-episodic painting in which many human, animal and divine figures are depicted. As with most of the paintings in this manuscript, the multi-episode attitude applied in this painting gives a particular dramatic atmosphere to the work. Almost the entire work supports a flat treatment towards the use of colour.



**Figure 1:** folio from Akbar's *Rāmāyana*, Sītā's trial



Figure 4-67: folio from Abd al-Rahīm's *Rāmāyana*, Sītā undergoes the order by fire, artist: attribute to Yūsuf Ali, 26.9×13.9 cm



Figure 4-66: A folio from the Jagat Singh's *Rāmāyana*, Sītā's trial.

Providing a more precise and detailed formal analysis of the three paintings, the table below (Table 1) shows various formal elements of the paintings. In this line, eleven criteria are set out in detail. They are : Theme, script, line, colors, human figure and clothing, animals and birds, mythical characters, plants and vegetal elements, buildings and architectural elements, sky, and composition and layout.

Table 1: Formal analysis of the three paintings:

	<i>Akbar's Ramayana</i>	<i>Abd al-Rahim's Ramayana</i>	<i>Mewar Ramayana</i>
<b>Theme</b>	Sita, in the centre/ Crowded scene/ People circle round the ordeal fire in a night or evening scene	Rama and his ministers at the bottom/ Sita at the top of the page/ simple scene at night	Multi episode scene (descending of the gods, fire ordeal/ Crowded/ Evening scene
<b>Script</b>	Two narrow text blocks each containing one line in Persian/ Fine <i>Nasta'liq</i>	Large text block containing eleven lines in Persian/ Excellent <i>Nasta'liq</i>	<i>nagari'</i> script
<b>Lines</b>	Cursive lines in natural elements and bodies / Straight lines in hut and some parts of the bodies	Straight lines applied in depiction of the bodies	Cursive and straight lines are both applied/ Straight lines in bodies give them puppet-like characters
<b>Colours</b>	Contrast between warm colours of the clothes and cooler background colour/ Shade like effects can be seen in the sky and the fire	Lucid orange colours/ Shade like effects can be seen in the fire and the sky	Flat/ Green grassland as an almost cool context for warm clothes/ Flat blue sky/ Lucid white colours (elephants)
<b>Human Figure/ Clothing</b>	Faces both in profile and three-quarter view/ Rama in dark skin worn by yellow dress, seated on a golden throne/ Sita dressed in white long <i>sari</i> / The main protagonists bear heads somehow inclined downward, a trend common in Persian paintings	Stiff and puppet-like/ Profile and three-quarter views/ Long <i>uttariyas</i> / Sita wears <i>choli</i> and long <i>pijama</i>	All faces in profile view/ Stiff and rigid style/ Rama in blue skin/ <i>Dhotis</i> , <i>pijamas</i> , <i>choli</i> , <i>uttriyas</i>
<b>Animals&amp; Birds</b>	Monkeys and bears rendered in a dramatic style reacting to the event	High ranking monkeys and bears are dressed in crowns, the bears wear <i>uttarya</i> and <i>dhoti</i> , the monkeys wear only <i>dhoti</i> / Monkey soldiers are small and naked	Monkeys and bears in dramatic mood/ Elephants, cows and Brahma's vehicle (swan) in white, and adorned
<b>Mythical Characters</b>	Divine beings and gods in the sky/ Gods seated on lotus flowers	Dressed <i>rakshasas</i> with spotted skin, horns on their heads, and long ears	Gods with their attributes and their <i>hamsas</i> (vehicles)
<b>Plants&amp; Vegetal Elements</b>	Scattered and sparse bushes and scanty small trees in the background	Scattered bushes distinct leaves made up of single touches of brush	Scattered touches of green tones representing bushes on the green grassland context
<b>Buildings&amp; Architectural Elements</b>	The structure is made up of bricks on the left with a pavilion and an onion shaped cupola	_____	Almost simple structure on the right/ <i>Iharoka</i> from which Sita is looking down
<b>Sky</b>	Azure blue background filled with scrolled and twisted white clouds	Flat blue sky partly covered by orange touches	Flat azure blue strip
<b>Composition and Layout</b>	Rama's head coincides with the horizontal line derived from golden ratios/ Sita is not completely displaced at the very centre	Two distinct horizontal registers/ Characters in circle arrangement round the fire	Landscape layout/ Several subsidiary episodes/ A pictorial gap between in middle between the centre and the building

## Conclusion

As shown in the detailed image of the composition, in Akbar's manuscript the episode of the fire trial is somewhat crowded in terms of pictorial elements. The characters are arranged around the fire but are not entirely positioned in the center of the page. The displacement of the head of Rama coincides with the extracted line according to the golden relation.

In the copy of Abd al-Rahim, both the top and bottom registers can be identified as shown in the detailed picture. The disposition of Rama and his servants is somewhat circular. The text box occupies most of the top registry.

The copy by Rana Jagat Singh includes several subsidiary episodes. The main episode, the ordeal of fire, is almost central. The sky with its flat blue color has completely made a distinct record of the earth with its totally green hue. The overpopulation of numbers in Mewar's copy is about his use of different but related episodes of the story presented in a single painting while in figure 1 it is the result of the dominating style of the compact and busy composition prevalent in the manuscript, a pattern most likely derived from the Persian style of miniature painting.

In general, the formal traits of both Mughal copies are the result of a deep Persian influence and the fusion of these features with the Indian conventions of miniature painting which later became more alive in the copy of Abd al-Rahim rather than that of Akbar. On the contrary, the Mewar copy presents almost all Indian conventional qualities. When we study these qualities from the viewpoint of religious and cultural affiliations and trends of their patrons we will find the deep influence of their tastes and preferences in the choice of attitudes and artistic orientations to produce works of art.

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