



# Verbatim Approach Of Indian Aesthetic Theories For Miniature Paintings

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**Abstract:** The foundation of Indian aesthetic philosophy is found in various schools of thoughts such as *Rasa*, *Alamkara*, *Vakrokti*, *Riti*, *Auchitya*, and *Dhvani*. Excepting the *Natyashastra*, which is an encyclopedia on the art of drama and inclusive of the visual art forms, the other theories originate from ancient and medieval Sanskrit literature. For centuries, these literary aesthetic concepts have been applied to various visual art forms for comprehending and appreciating their beauty. This paper attempts a verbatim application of these theories to visual expressions in miniature paintings with an aim to evaluate their application and investigate the profundity of interrelationship between the literature and the arts. The methodology adopted is a comparative analysis of formal compositional elements of miniature paintings with the terminologies mentioned in these aesthetic theories; as found in ancient Sanskrit texts such as *Natyashastra*, *Kavya Alamkara*, *Dhvanyaloka* etc. The selection of visuals has been done through random sampling method from the popular Rajasthani, Mughal and Pahari tradition. The evaluation is based on observation of similarities found in the visual and the literary mediums. It has been found that the theory of *Rasa* has been extensively and eloquently applied by many historians to appreciate the beauty of Indian miniature paintings. Surprisingly, the other aesthetic theories, though accepted as essential to Indian aesthetic thought have barely been utilized in deciphering the nuances of these paintings. One does find a cursory mention of *Alamkara* or *Dhvani* with reference to paintings, but the same cannot be said affirmatively about all these philosophies. It is concluded that the descriptions of these paintings as found in various sources consider these theories for critically evaluating their essence; but do not explain them in terms of the nomenclatures which are specific to these aesthetic schools of thought.

**Index Terms** - Indian, Aesthetics, Miniature, *Rasa*, *Alamkara*, *Riti*, *Dhvani*, *Vakrokti*, *Guna*, *Dosha*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The notion of Indian aesthetics is found in various schools of thought, each of which developed in the philosophical, theological, social and economic context that existed in ancient and medieval India. Each school of thought postulated a different reason for the existence of beauty; which inspired the creative minds for a unique expression in numerous visual mediums. The enquiry into the nature of the beautiful has its roots in the Vedic and Upanishad texts which mention that beauty is synonymous with truth and god (*Satyam Shivam Sudaram*). Hence, the foundation of Indian aesthetic thought was unanimously associated with the idea of divine<sup>1</sup>.

*Natyashastra* written by sage Bharatmuni in the fourth century is a canonical ancient text dedicated to defining the nuances of the art of drama. Chapter 6 and 7 of this encyclopedic text articulates for the first time, the concept of '*Rasa*' as a source of delight and soul of an artwork. Hence, Bharatmuni may be credited with initiating this philosophical idea which could be found beautifully entwined with the artistic forms. Since *Natyashastra* has a mention on painting, it is safe to presume that such a comprehensive application of the *Rasa* theory, though originally meant for dramatics, is relevant for appreciating the beauty of miniature painting; which did not exist in the ancient era. The concept of *Rasa* triggered an analytical enquiry for understanding the notion of beauty with contributions from Udbhatta, Lolatta, Sri

Sankuka and Abhinavagupta. In the centuries that followed, the reverberations of this philosophical approach towards comprehending beauty were furthered through the medium of literature. This lead to the introduction of new theories related to beauty such as *Alamkara* by Bhamaha, *Vakrokti* by Kuntaka, *Auchitya* by Kshmendra, *Riti* by Dandin and Vamana and *Dhvani* by Anandavardhana. According to Ray, texts such as *Alamkara shastras*, *Sangita shastras*, *Natyashastras*, *Shilpa shastras*, *Vastu shastras* etc. strictly speaking cannot claim to be any sort of a treatise on aesthetics. These are, in fact as rightly mentioned, canonical texts which mention form and norms, materials and techniques, types and characteristics as well as function and purpose of these arts. An enquiry into the *sarira* (body) and *atma* (soul) of an artwork followed a historical course of what can be classified as the *prachina* and *navina* schools of thought which span from fourth to tenth century<sup>2</sup>.

In the contemporary art historical methodology, since the concept of *Rasa* holistically encompassed all creative expressions from performing arts such as drama and music to visual arts such as sculpture and painting, it was widely accepted as a parameter for seeking the soul or beauty in an artwork. The question thus arises that has this change of medium from arts to literature for the purpose of enquiry into the subject of beauty had an implication on its methodology towards appreciation of paintings. Though many historians have exquisitely elaborated on *Rasa* in paintings, such a meticulous investigation with reference to other aesthetic theories as a cause of beauty in miniature paintings does not seem to have been attempted in detail<sup>3</sup>. Various attempts have been made to clarify the nuances of these theories and at times they have been applied to appreciate the fresco paintings from Ajanta and Bagh, but a verbatim approach in the Indian miniature tradition has been missing. This paper is a nascent attempt to identify these aesthetic concepts with their precise existence in art forms and types in the context of Indian miniatures.

## II. RASA IN MINIATURES

The term *Rasa* owes its primary meaning to the *Ayurveda* where it implies juice, extract or essence. Bharatmuni in the *Natyashastra* for the first time accords this term with reference to the art experience. *Samyoga* of concepts such as *Bhava* (emotion), *Vibhava* (cause), *Anubhava* (consequent), *Vyabhichari Bhava* and *Sanchari Bhava* (Transitory physical and mental states) leading to *Sthayi Bhava* (Dominant emotional state) lead us into the critical understanding of how *Rasa* is evoked. It is pertinent to remember that he mentions eight *Rasas* and the ninth, *Santa Rasa* was added later to this list by Abhinavagupta. This profound probe into *Rasa* by the author embraces a deity and color for each emotional state.

Today, many leading historians have elaborated on these nuances in the context of miniature paintings (see, Goswamy:1986). Hence, if we look at the union of Radha and Krishna from the Kishangarh school of miniatures (Fig.1.1), we can easily identify the presence of *Shringara Rasa*, which is the most popularly depicted *Rasa* of all. Alternatively, the miniature titled 'Dashratha falls after fainting' from Mewar (Fig.1.2) is a perfect example for *Karuna Rasa*. Since much wonderful literature is available on this theory, I would like to focus on the other theories in the context of miniatures.

## III. ALAMKARA IN MINIATURES

Let us begin with Bhamaha, who in 7<sup>th</sup> century introduced us to the idea of *Alamkara* as a source of beauty in poetry in his literary composition called *Kavya Alamkara*. It consists of six *paricchedas*/chapters where he defines *Alamkara* as an embellishment or ornamentation in the context of poetry/kavya. The chapters are inclusive of concepts such as *Vakrokti* (twisted or oblique expression), *Guna* (quality, merit, virtue) and *Dosha* (flaw). Bhamaha mentions various kinds of *Gunas* and *Doshas* that can exist in any literary text and act as a cause of beauty. But in visual arts, it was established that all that serves the artistic purpose is *Guna* and that which does not is *Dosha*. For instance the miniature paintings found in the manuscript of *Tutinama* (stories of a parrot) created during the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar, were aimed at educating the young emperor and can thus be considered as containing *Guna*. However, if a literal method of identifying the *Guna* and *Dosha* in a painting is adopted, it would rather refer to qualities and flaws of line, color, form, light etc. Thus, in a miniature painting if the use of line does not delineate the figure clearly in the narrative context it is a *Dosha*, though it may serve the artistic purpose such as satisfying the patron or recording an event.

Bhamaha also elaborates on the types of *Alamkara*, which were broadly categorized as *Shabda* and *Artha Alamkaras* i.e those which relate to word and its sound and its meaning respectively. In literal sense if *Shabda* is the building block of *kavya*, then it will correspond to elements of art, which are the building blocks of a painting. Similarly, *Artha* corresponds to meaning or content in a work of art. In Visual terms, many historians have decoded the concept of *Alamkara* as an ornament, which is literally worn or applied for the beautification of the body or is present as a motif or object that beautifies the environment.

Let us illustrate the literal approach of *Shabda* and *Artha Alamkaras* in miniature painting. *Anupras* or alliteration is a kind of *Shabda Alamkara* where the sound of the word is repeated with word variation. In *Bhagvatapurana* of Pahari miniature tradition, a painting titled *Vastraharan* (Krishna stealing clothes) from Guler (Fig.1.3), the form of the *gopis* surrounding Krishna, repeated in various postures by the artist can then be understood as alliteration. Similarly, *Yamaka* or homonym is a *Shabda Alamkara* where rhyme is created with same words having different meanings. In this sense, the *raga* and *ragini* personified as *nayak* and *nayika* can then be comprehended as a visual representation of *Yamaka*; since *raga* can be interpreted as a musical mode as well as a character<sup>4</sup>.

When we speak of *Atishyokti* or exaggeration as an example of *Artha Alamkara*, a distinct miniature that one maybe reminded of is Radha Bani Thani from the Kishangarh school of Rajasthan (Fig.1.4). Her exaggerated features with high arched brows and pointed nose, petite chin and huge eyes are surely inspired by the *Alamkara* of *Atishyokti*. Rather than using the term 'exaggeration' or 'stylization' of features for figures painted by the artists of this school, the term *Atishyokti* will be more befitting or its aesthetic appreciation. However, some *Alamkaras* such as *Upama* or simile and *Rupaka* or metaphor are more readily used by historians while describing the beauty of Indian miniatures.

An important concept of *Vakrokti* or twisted expression remains central to *Kavya Alamkara* and Bhamaha considers it to be *samanyalakshana* of *kavya*. Though, Kuntaka was a major exponent of this theory, it is nevertheless defined clearly as an essential notion associated with *Alamkara*. The narrative content of most miniatures can be deciphered easily and the concept of twisted expression may not be very easy to identify in the miniature tradition. However, the allegorical portraits of Mughal emperor Jahangir can be said to contain the element of *Vakrokti* as its *Alamkara*. For instance, Jahangir seated on the hourglass (Fig.1.5), painted with a halo consisting of sun and crescent moon is a twisted visual expression by the artist to establish that his patron considered himself to be the ruler of time and universe. Historians do mention the word allegorical while critically discussing portraits of Jahangir, but the word allegory may be substituted with term *Vakrokti* for achieving aesthetic purity of thought.

#### IV. RITI IN MINIATURES

The concept of *Riti* or 'style' first finds mention in the *Natyashastra* in the context of *vachika abhinaya*. The theory of *Riti* as the essence of poetry was popularized by Dandin and Vamana Vamana defined *Riti* as a special arrangement of words which employs *Gunas* and avoids *Dosha* and is combined with poetic excellence or *Vishista pada rachna ritih, Vishesho Gunatma*. In the context of literature, words and quality of words combined with meaning and quality of meaning is what categorizes it as *Vaidarbhi, Gaudi* or *Magadhi*. This geographical distinction is rather dependent on the number of *Gunas* each contains. Utilizing the same logic, we can understand *Riti* in visual art as element of art and the quality of element of art combined with its meaning and quality of meaning. Historians have elaborated extensively on defining the stylistic features of various sub schools of Rajasthani and Pahari miniature painting. Interestingly, this geographical distinction of style is also characteristically based on qualities of *Gunas* of paintings. For instance, the use of line is a prominent element and its quality in miniatures from Mewar is bold and angular as compared to Kangra, where it is more delicate and lyrical. The stylistic distinctions have been well established but their expression would be more appropriate if the terminology defines them as *Gunas*. This would rather justify the application of *Riti* theory to the study of miniatures. Similarly, the colors and the soft pastel qualities of color from the Kangra school are the *Gunas* which define its *Riti*. Dandin also propagated that the *Shobha* of poetry lies in employing the *Gunas* and avoiding the *Doshas*. Hence, we may say that in visual arts, *Riti* can be understood through analysis of compositional elements.

## V. AUCHITYA IN MINIATURES

The theory of *Auchitya*, was popularized by Kshmendra in his book titled *Auchityavischarcha*. With its root word *Uchita* or appropriate, fit and proper, the theory claims that there is a possibility of making perfect choice of subject, idea, word or devices which can be the cause of beauty in *kavya*. According to him, concepts of *Rasa*, *Shabda*, *Artha*, *Alamkara*, *Riti* and *Dhvani* can all be harmoniously blended with the concept of *Auchitya* and assessed for their appropriate usage. However, many scholars have interpreted the term *Auchitya* variously, ranging from that which is pleasing or beautiful, to that which leads us into superior knowledge; as well as that which has a favorable presence.

Employing a verbatim approach for *Auchitya* in miniatures, the portrait of young Shahjahan by court artist Bichitr, depicts the emperor standing in the attitude of offering prayer is a fine example of *Unauchitya* (opposite of appropriate); since in Islamic culture prayer must be offered seated with folded legs. Kshmendra said that the learned call a thing proper when it is in conformity with the other. The notion of *Uchita* is thus called *Auchitya*. This implies that there is an accepted relationship between two things; which is contradictory in the example above with the Islamic way of praying and the portrait of the emperor. Thus, *Auchitya* can also be understood as a condition or *upaadhi* which has a relative existence. To quote another example, the representation of Krishna wearing a yellow dhoti would be *Auchitya* as per the established iconographic traditions; whereas when he is represented wearing a Mughal *jama* and a *pyjama* in a painting titled *Vasant Ragini* from Bundi school (Fig.1.6), it can be conveniently termed as *Unauchitya*. Hence, we can say that anything can be defined as inappropriate when it is not in conformity with the scriptures or ways of the world. The theory acts as a tool for evaluation of an artwork with socio, cultural or religious implications.

In my understanding, an interesting case of application of this theory can be a Mughal miniature painting titled Jahangir's dream by Abul Hassan (Fig1.7); where he had instructed the artist to paint him as a powerful and dominating figure embracing his enemy. Though, in reality his enemy was much more powerful and depiction such as this may initially seem *Unauchitya*; it can actually be justified as *Auchitya*, since it is visualization of a dream and the *Alamkara* of *Atishyokti* seems evident and befitting. The text also mentions that the nature of *Auchitya* is dynamic and its definition may depend on the transformed conditions of a culture and factors of time and space. Since, it involves both the creator and the receiver, comprehending *Auchitya* in the medium of miniatures from various schools would demand further research.

## VI. DHVANI IN MINIATURES

The text of *Dhvanyaloka* by Anandavardhana mentions the concept of *Dhvani* or suggestiveness as the essence of *kavya*. It is one of the most insightful theories in Indian aesthetic studies; which initially faced many challenges but was ultimately justified by its author and found mass acceptance. The term *Dhvani* when translated exactly means sound but it can also be understood as reverberations created in the mind when a viewer is exposed to a creative work. This notion of suggestiveness can be deciphered on three levels in literature. The first level is *Abidha* which denotes the literal meaning of the word. On the next level, it is known as *Lakshana* or what the word indicates and on the last level it is known as *Vyanjana* or what the word suggests. When applied to the visual art forms such as miniatures, we can grasp the notion of *Dhvani* by following these three levels of understanding form and narrative.

In the Visual context, for instance, when we come across a painting which we are not familiar with, we appreciate it only as *Abidha*. For instance, we may describe a painting with a figure of a standing man holding a mirror (Fig.1.8). When we observe the *Lakshana* of the image, we may realize that it is ornamented royal figure wearing a translucent *jama* and a stripped *pyjama*, which was a typical characteristic of Mughal emperors during the reign of Jahangir. But the analysis of the painting does not end here and we need to critically evaluate as to what this portrait of young Jahangir is suggesting. The subject of the portrait is a young majestic figure with dreaminess in his eyes which holds up a mirror, thereby suggesting a sense of pride he had in himself. This proposition by the artist/patron is what constitutes the element of *Vyanjana*.

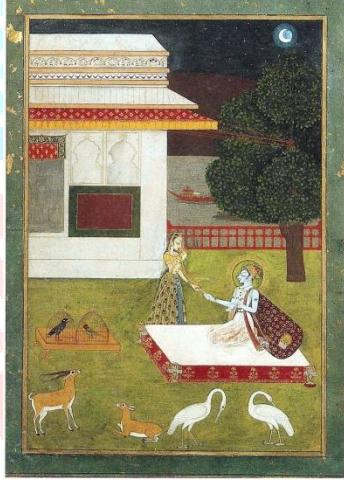
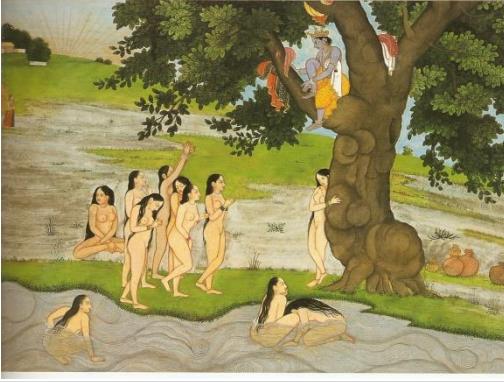
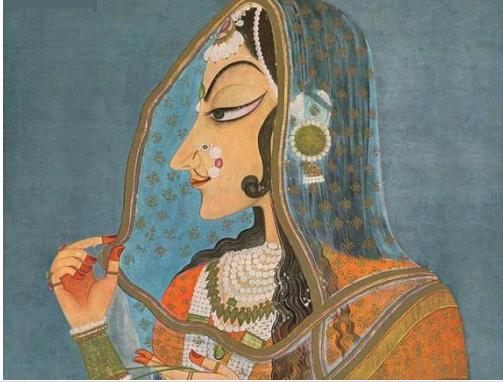
We may also interpret it as a fine example of *Shringara Rasa*, which brings us to the point that Anandavardhana has categorized *Dhvani* into three types. *Vastu Dhvani* relates to the theme of *kavya*, *Alamkara Dhvani* expounds how figures of speech have a suggested meaning and *Rasa Dhvani* establishes that *bhava* is suggested and *Rasa* is evoked in the viewers. It is emphasized in the *Dhvanyaloka*, that the emotive elements are the main criterion for the selection of form, whereupon the author bridges the gap

between literature and the arts. Since, the notion of form is common to literature and painting, it allows to be juxtaposed perfectly for aesthetic appreciation of both.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Indian religious, philosophical and canonical texts along with vast poetic literature have been fundamental for developing the aesthetic theories in India. In the case of visual arts, the concept of *Rasa* was the foremost step for an enquiry into the beautiful. This notion of interrelationship between the literature and the arts unlocked multiple avenues for scholars and historians. Beginning from the fresco paintings of Ajanta and Bagh, an extensive body of work has been published on the application of the *Rasa* theory to the Indian painting tradition; including the miniatures. Translations and critical texts of other popular aesthetic theories of *Alamkara*, *Vakrokti*, *Riti* and *Dhvani* have been published to thrust a further understanding. However, their use for establishing the relationship between literature and the visual arts requires further research. The historical methodology followed in this paper relates them to the medium of literature, which they were intended for and that is justified. If they have been utilized for appreciating visual arts, their application has been limited to the definitions as in the case of *Alamkara*. This paper is an embryonic effort for initiating this enormous task of visually translating the literary texts by taking a literal approach; thereby explaining the nomenclatures and terminologies specific to each theory as visible in visual terms. It shall open further avenues of research into what makes Indian miniatures truly beautiful in the philosophically and artistically blended world.

#### Figures

	
<p>Fig.1.1 <i>Shringara Rasa</i>: Radha makes excuses, Kishangarh, late 18<sup>th</sup> century</p>	<p>Fig.1.2 <i>Karuna Rasa</i>: Dashratha falls after fainting, Mewar, 17<sup>th</sup> century</p>
	
<p>Fig.1.3 <i>Shabda Alamkara (Anupras)</i>, Vastraharan, Bhagvata Purana, late 18<sup>th</sup> century</p>	<p>Fig.1.4 <i>Artha Alamkara (Atishyokti)</i>, Radha Bani Thani, Kishangarh, mid 18<sup>th</sup> century</p>

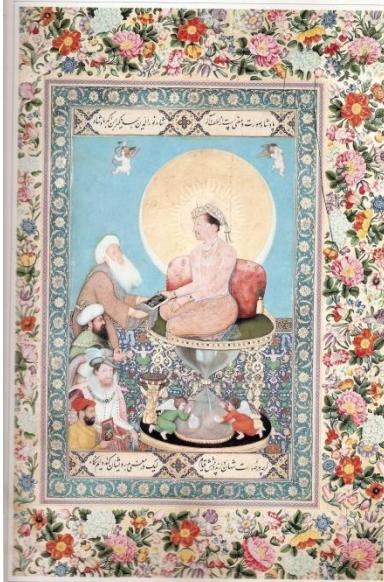


Fig.1.5 *Vakrokti*, Jahangir prefers a sufi sheikh to kings, Bichitr, Mughal, early 17<sup>th</sup> century



Fig.1.6 *Unauchitya*, Vasant Ragini, Bundi, late 18<sup>th</sup> century

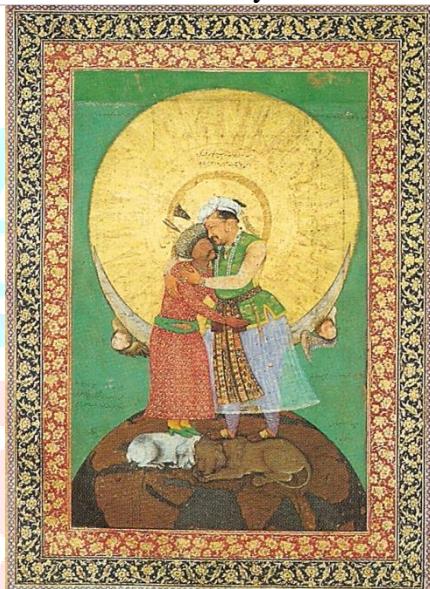


Fig.1.7 *Auchitya*, Jahangir's dream, Abul Hasan, Mughal, early 17<sup>th</sup> century



Fig.1.8 *Dhvani*, Salim as a young man, Bichitr, Mughal, mid 17<sup>th</sup> century

## VII. ENDNOTES

1. For a philosophical detail on the Indian Vedic tradition and the evolution of the concept of beauty along with the development of various theories, see, Krishnamorthy (1981).
2. Niharranjan Ray classifies the development of aesthetic thought into two major categories. The first category belongs to Bharata's *Natyashastra*, poetic texts by Bhamaha, Dandin, Vamana, Rudrata, *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, chapter on Shilpa in the *Agnipurana* and references on painting in Vatsyayana's *Kamasutram*. The second category belongs to thinkers such as Bhatta, Lolatta, Sankuka, Anandavardhana and Abhinavgupta who investigated into the notion of *atma* with reference to poetry. For further detail, see Ray (1974).
3. C. Rajendran elaborates on the nuances of *Dhvani* theory but very briefly mentions about the application in the context of *Rasa Dhvani* towards the end of his chapter. This is done in reference to the comingling of emotions such as *Raudra*, *Karuna* and *Sringara* as visible in the fresco painting depicting demons fighting with *Tripurantaka* on the sanctum wall of Brihadeshvara temple at Tanjore. See, Tripathi (2019).
4. Radhavallabh Tripathi while explaining *Alamkara* as a canon for visual arts in the last section of his essay indicates that the difference in medium may change the classification of *Alamkaras*. To illustrate this he gives an example on *Dipaka* as a literary *Alamkara*, a musical *raga* and *Raga Dipak* in miniature painting, each of which has a different expression. He also affirms that some *Alamkaras*

may not be significant in visual arts but other arts such as music, dance or drama. See, Tripathi (2019).

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