Chapter 2

Islamic Painting in Indian Sub-continent
CHAPTER – II

ISLAMIC PAINTING IN INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT

History tells us that whenever any civilization invades and annexes another civilization it influences its political, social, economic and cultural traits, specially fine Arts, and leaves its powerful impressions on them. When Muslim civilization came to India, it was fully advanced in literature, architecture and other fine arts. It can not be denied that during Muslim rule in India, fine arts achieved remarkable glory. ‘The sultanate period monarchs and Mughal emperors patronized many arts and skills such as textiles, carpet weaving, architecture, tent covering, regal costume, metallic and decorative tile work, jewellery, ornament and paintings and tried to expand and develop them. The illustrated manuscripts, painting and calligraphic designs were very popular because of their excellence. These arts were lavishly developed and patronized by Mughal courts and very fine and artistic styles came into existence.'

The Indian subcontinent has produced some of the finest expressions of Islamic Art known to intellectual and artistic vigour. Mutual exchange and interaction with other artists at all levels was quite common. Non-Muslims ideas and motifs were used to create a unique dimension in the Islamic visual Arts.

A. Sultanat Period

In the year 712 AD the armies of a new faith carried the standards of Islam in India when the Arabs invaded Sindh. It was followed by repeated
onslaughters of Mahmud of Ghazni. In 1181 AD Shahabuddin Ghauri replaced the Ghaznavid rule and began a series of drastic conquests which brought ultimately Hindustan under Muslims rule. Shahabuddin died in 1206 AD but before that he established a state in India separate from Ghazna and Khorasan, which later on became known as Sultanate of Delhi. His successors specially Iltutmish established a truly independent and powerful state. The Sultanate of Delhi comprised of five successive dynasties, the Khiljis, the Tughlaqs, the Sayyids, the Lodis and the Suries and consolidated muslim rule in India. These political developments helped various muslim arts to flourish in India.

Muslim paintings in India between the fifteenth and early seventeenth century were confined to manuscript illustration or illumination only as per eastern Islamic artistic literary fashion. Initial pictorial style was borrowed from indigenous Indian sources and muslim artists added new elements in it. But the structural composition and bright colour scheme were inherited from mature Islamic traditions.

In Persian empire despite the barbaric destructions inflicted by Timur and Mangols miniature painting flourished in the fifteenth century. Then the ruthless Timur and his successors completely changed themselves and established settled courts of elegance, refinement and sophistication. This also led to patronage and development of fine arts. In India Tughluq sultans and their provincial governors of Malwa, Gujrat and Jaunpur executed their patronage to fine arts specially paintings in the fifteenth century specially Gujarat became famous for its talented artists. Traders and painters brought
inspiring manuscripts to India from the cultural centers of Persia. They were welcomed in this region and their trading flourished. The painters borrowed certain features found in Jain paintings of Gujrat specially the vivid and attractive colour combination. Their projections and innovate designs pleased the viewers. Conceptual bias apart they admired works of arts which existed there before advance of Islam.7

Contemporary literature encouraged elaborate wall paintings in the time of Muhammad bin Tughluq and the poet Amir Khusrao referred to his patron’s love for manuscripts and paintings. During Firoz Sha’a reign a mystical poet of his court praised these products specially painted images.8 These manuscripts based on the Islamic literary traditions narrated various texts and subjects borrowed from Indian indigenous sources. But in style of execution these manuscripts showed predominance of Persian influence.

The early sixteen century introduced a change in Muslim paintings viz rejection of west Indian style and ideas. Due to Uzback attack on Heart in 1507 many artists and craftsman of Persia fled to India for settlement. Further more trading relations with Persian city of Shiraz which was an important center for extensive commercial miniature production gave much impetus to paintings. This art got much fillip because the embassies of Persia and India encouraged exchange of gifts and trade items and also increased the availability of artistic manuscripts. Persian culture was held in high esteem in India specially Mandu the capital of Malwa excelled in copying Persian culture in language, food, costumes and arts.
The emphasis of Turkman Shirazi artists on simplicity in figure and decoration influenced Indian artists to introduce treatment of grass and natural vegetation in their production. This is reflected in a Malwa cookery book, the *nimatnama* which was written for the Sultan Ghiyath ud-din at Mandu and illustrated for his son Nasir-ud-din. Another Persian manuscript made for Nasir ud din on the style of the *Nimatnama* contained a beautiful illustration partly derived from contemporary paintings in Iran.9

There has been a recent discovery of a manuscript called *Sikandarnama* compiled in 1531-32 A.D. under Nusrat Shah ruler of Bengal. It reflects the Persian influences along with Indian elements.10 Other notable miniature painting of later fifteenth century is a compilation during Firoz shah Tughlaq’s time called *laur chanda* relating to a love story in Avadhi and it got wide popularity. This manuscript shows Persian inspiration but actually is a combination of both Indian and Persian features. Persian influence is visible in the colour scheme and decoration.11 The central authority of the Delhi sultanate was weakened in 16th century under the inefficient rule of the lodi Afghan rulers. In 1526 the opponents of Ibrahim lodi invited Babur to invade India. Babur defeated both Ibrahim Lodi and Rana Sanga and made himself ruler of Delhi. After this event art started its wonderful journey of glory and magnificence under Moghul empire.

**B. Mughal Period**

Babur was a highly talented person. He was a poet, scholar, soldier and collector of books and art. He wrote a manuscript of Holy Quran and sent it to
Mecca. Babur wrote his memoirs which contains beautiful and honest information. He has referred to abundance of artists and craftsmen in India, but unfortunately no illustrated manuscript is available which can be attributed to his patronage.  

Babur’s son Humayun ascended the throne after his father’s death. He was a gentle and scholarly person deeply interested in books and paintings and had set up a good library and collection of paintings. According to Mughal historian Abul Fazl, Humayun was so fond of manuscripts that he took with him his favourite volumes in military campaigns and an artist accompanied him during his long exile, when he took refuge with Shah Tahmasp, the Safavid ruler of Iran. After returning to India he hired several artists who had formerly worked for Shah Tahmasp. Two Iranian painters, Mir Syed Ali and Abdus Samad joined Humayun at Kabul in 1550 and they were soon followed by two more painters Mir Musavir and Dost Muhammad. These talented men brought the latest Persian techniques and style to the Mughal court. A portrait of a young scholar by Mir Syed Ali shows his Safavid masters. Here mention is made of a painting of Humayun’s era portraying royal hunting of Nilgai. It displays Persian influence and is a good specimen of art.  

Humayun was succeeded by young Akbar. Akbar developed a good taste of painting and tried to expand royal collections. To accomplish this purpose he turned to Humayun’s Persian painters – Mir Syed Ali and Abdus Samad. These two masters hired local artists trained in various styles and made beautiful paintings of Indianized versions of Persian art and some of them
included the chosen pieces of art of pre-Mughal sultans. Some paintings were derived from various Indian languages, and few of them showed specimens of Jain art practiced in Gujrat and Rajasthan. Tutinama is a significant example of this period.\textsuperscript{16}

*Hamzanama* was Akbar's first major manuscript project. It originally consisted of fourteen volumes, each contained 100 illustrations drawn on large sheets of cloth. The studio work was supervised by Mir Sayyid Ali, and later on by Abdus Samad. Paintings in the *Hamzanama*, showed Akbar's conquests and presented nice explanation of some Persian and indigenous South Asian idioms with better, consistency and refinement than *Tutinama*. Though Individual motifs and intricately patterned surfaces were derived from Persian paintings but appropriate colours, lively composition, emphatic gestures, and overall intensity of feelings showed their perfect Indian origin and style.

*Hamzanama*, *Timurnama* and *Baburnama* were reputed and exquisite specimens which showed grandeur of Mughals and established them as the legitimate heirs of Timurids and most outstanding rulers of India. Many of their pictures narrated beautiful description of battle scenes, hunting, expeditions and military sieges.\textsuperscript{17} *Tarikh-i-Alfi* (History of a thousand years), compiled in Akbar’s rule gives factual account of the history of Islam’s first millennium. Akbar also ordered translations of important Hindu texts in Persian. One of them known as Harivamsa is the geneology of Vishnu an important deity of Hindu trimoorti.
In 1580, Akbar invited Jesuit priests from Goa to his court where they participated in theological discussions and debates and presented to emperor many illustrations, European prints, paintings, and drawings. These gifts were studied with interest by the participants. Some Mughal artists made faithful and good copies of certain art pieces. Further divan (collection) of poet Anvari, the BAHAMISTAN, the Khamsa of Nizami, the Khamsa of Amir Khusrau Dehlvi, and Anvar-i-suhayli and some other luxurious manuscripts of eloquent Persian poetical anthologies were illustrated by painters of Akbar’s court. A Mughal noble KULAGU KHAN discovered in a fort a copy of Chingiznama prepared by BASAWAN and coloured by Nand Gwaliari, and another famous painting captioned “Dervish Rebuked from the Baharistan”. These paintings were placed in Akbar’s studio in 1590. In second volume of Akbarnama reference was made to natural drawings and paintings.

Akbar’s son Jahangir had great interest in painting, and established a studio in Allahabad. The artists of this studio worked on two distinct modes or models. The first model was a simplified one with more focus on Akbari style of painting, while the second comprised of a precise, flat and highly decorative style inspired by Safavid Persian paintings, especially those of Aqa Riza. Jahangir encouraged his artists to develop their own particular ideas and talents. A painter named Abul Hasan concentrated upon depicting court scenes and making official portraits, Mansur specialized in natural history subjects, Daulat created general portraits and so forth. The ability of Jahangiri painters to penetrate deep into the heart of reality was made possible by their extraordinary skill and steady hard work to display the natural qualities of human character.
and psychological interrelationship. A picture called “Jahangir embracing Shah Abbas”, shows the mighty mughal ruler standing on a throne and affectionately embracing submissive Shah Abbas king of Iran.

Such a conscious use of painting for political purposes continued to dominate the imperial studio under the next emperor Shahjahan. Then royal attention probably shifted towards architecture. However paintings following traits of Jahangir’s style continued to draw popular attention and applause.

The formal characteristics of Abul Hasan’s portraits were liked by Shahjahan and he made many more portraits during his reign. “Padshahnama” composed by Abdul Hamid Lahori covered extensively the principal aspects and activities of Shahjahan’s highly ritualized public life.

The love of Shahjahani painters for idealized real physical situations and their preference for lush colours and their opulent effects extented towards depictions of pictures of birds, animals, and flowers and excelled to display glimpses of imperial power and glory.

The quantity, quality and coverage of Mughal paintings declined considerably during Aurangzeb’s reign. The imperial studio could only flourish under enlightened and continuous patronage of certain nobles while the emperor paid very little attention to it.

But this decline of the Mughal studio does not mean that imperial Mughal paintings ceased to exist under Aurangzeb. Portraits, more useful than illustrations to explain and analyse poetic texts or romantic pieces of literature continued to be produced especially in the early years of Aurangzebs reign.
"The Durbar of the emperor Aurangzeb of 1658", for example, maintains the ideal qualities and tendencies of Shahjahani paintings. Chitaraman, Muhammad Afzal and Govardhan were some prominent artists attached to king Muhammad Shah when decline of Mughal rule had started.

The influence of the imperial patronage of art of painting led to its spread in far and wide corners of the country. It combined local tendencies and foreign influences of varying intensity with admirable degree of adaptability and acceptability. Rajasthani style came into being in the 16 century side by side with Mughal school. Its abstract character, as opposed to the naturalistic tendencies cultivated by the Mughal artists retained essentially Hindu style. "Ragamala" and RASI RAPRIYA are some notable illustrations of this period. Painters of Rajasthani style developed a distinct school of their own. They belonged to several states of Rajasthan, namely Mewar, Bundi, Kotah, Marwar, Bikaner, Kishangarh and Jaipur. The Mughal and Rajasthan styles interacted with each other. Some Rajput states lying at the foot of western Himalayas stretching roughly from Jammu to Garhwal also followed Rajasthani school. A further sub-division between painters of Basohli and the Kangra was developed. No doubt this school offered some opposition to the hegemonical style of Islamic art professed by muslim painters of India. During declining period of Mughal authority besides Mughal art the Rajput and Sikh schools represented Hindu art and constituted the upsurge of Indian creativity. With advent of British rule and the domination of foreign fashions, techniques, and colour schemes, the whole of India apparently forgot her glorious past. In fact Indian artists did not offer any competition to the fermenting western art and
accepted the onslaught of European current of thought without any resistance. However during British period an ardent lover of Indian art E.B. Havell, Principal of Calcutta school of Art and his leading disciple Rabindranath Tagore established Bengal School of Art to reshape contemporary taste and to make Indian artists aware of their rich heritage. During mid 20th century Indian painting occupied some place in the International scene. Havell, Tagore, Nandalal Bose and some other talented painters tried to stick to Mughal traditions and made efforts to revive it.

C. Paintings in Deccan

Painting in the Deccan under Muslim patronage remained confined to a private manuscripts illustrating classical Persian literary books and gave emphasis on portraits and realistic natural scenes. ‘Deccan had become independent of the Delhi sultanate in the mid fourteenth century and was further split up into five separate kingdoms. Ahmadnagar Bijapur, Golconda, Berar and Bider’. Muslim rulers of Deccan states defeated the powerful Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagar which gave patronage to artists specially painters. After fall of this kingdom some of the artists with their talents were attached to Deccan courts.

"Tarikh-e-Husayn Shahi" contains illustrated pictures of Hindu rajas of Ahmadnagar in the northern Deccan. Some rajas of Ahmadnagar patronized ‘Ragmala’, executed in a fresh unsophisticated style. It was naturally linked with Hindu ideas than Islamic style.
In the field of arts taste of Bijapur rulers was quite different from Ahmadnagar. The artists of Bijapur displayed combined delicate exuberance in their paintings. The style patronized by Sultan of Bijapur Ibrahim Adil Shah II, famous for his love of music was peculiarly distinguished one. Some magnificent portraits of him conveyed highly aesthetic concept and were comparable with the contemporary Mughal portraits.\(^\text{34}\)

Painting of Golconda depicted complicated situations and trends. The Sultans of Golconda welcomed artists from all over the Islamic world and gave them free hand to work in accordance with subtle variations of their original style. In their works there is remarkable combination of floral and arabesque designs and they conveyed profound human emotions in addition to their decorative appearances.

Nizams of Hyderabad continued to patronize painter artists in their regime.\(^\text{35}\) The south Indian paintings are liked for attractive shapes and animated surface and background decorations.

**D. Enactment of Mughal Painting**

Among the many innovations introduced by the Mughals in the art of painting perhaps the most important one was the idea of Karkhana or workshop. In these workshops diverse type of artists worked together under one roof and thereby fostered better communication among them. It was an ideal place where the artists could experiment with new ideas and techniques. These experiments contributed significantly to the visual revolution of the Mughal art. In this respect the Mughal emperors followed the practice common
at the Persian courts. In 1522 Shah Ismail, the Persian Emperor setup a workshop consisting of copyists, painters, gilders, colour grinders, goldmixers and other artists and appointed the celebrated artists Bihzad its chief. Akbar’s Karkhana in his newly built capital Fatehpur Sikri was similar to it as reported by both Abul Fazl and Anthony Monserrate, the Jesuit clergyman who visited the Fatehpur Sikri between 1580 and 1582. This Karkhana or workshop continued to exist even in the gloomy days under Aurangzeb’s rule in the mid seventeenth century. According to Bernier’s version: “large halls are seen in many places, called Karkhana or workshops for the artisans. In one hall embroiderers are busily employed, supervised by a master. In another you can see goldsmiths, in the third hall, painters in the fourth, varnishers doing lacquer-work and in the fifth hall, Joiners, turners, tailors and shoemakers were busy in their work. In the sixth hall from silk, brocade, fine muslin of turbans, girdles with golden flowers and Hashiyas, and drawers and delicate night dresses for females were delicately prepared and finished.

However, it would not be correct to assume that Akbar wanted to introduce a new style of painting through these Karkhanas. The main purpose was to produce illuminated manuscripts, which involved elaborate production on a large scale with elegant cooperation of calligraphers, painters and skilfull preparators of various accessories like colour grinders, goldworkers, leatherworkers, bookbinders, and many more workers. The books to be copied and illustrated were often very long, and required full cooperation and concentration of all these different types of craftsmen and artists. Some of these artists were certainly prima donnas and produced beautiful works in little time.
It may be asserted that illustration of a copy of Akbarnama was something similar to the production of a drama of repute and the finalization of decorated “Hamzanama” could be compared with a musical extravagance. Over a hundred artists including calligraphers, burnishers and others who were involved in this exercise solely worked together in the imperial studio. It is also stated that in preparation of Hamzanama 1400 passages from the epic were artistically illustrated. An efficient supervision or effective control over men and materials could not possibly be achieved along with good results without existence of Karkhana.

Some of the achievements of Mughal artists were due to new and more sophisticated techniques learnt from Persian and European traditions. They made extensive experimentation with pigments and palette, various types of brushes, binding materials and, of course, with paper, which was the principal material used in Mughal paintings. Although all paintings were made in the same basic style yet, their expressions and appearances were influenced to some extent by the materials used. This is clearly demonstrated by a comparison of ‘Hamzanama’, painted on cloth, with ‘Akbarnama’, which is rendered on paper. The larger size as well as the materials used in Hamzanama required bolder and broader brush strokes and more expansive compositions, but lesser concern was shown to other minute and wider details of colour, which made the painting somewhat less refined but more spirited than smaller pictures of the Baburnama or the Akbarnama. In these paintings the artist had to work on a much smaller surface and his brush strokes were much finer, and the colours were applied more carefully and with greater economy and control.
The pictures made on paper were burnished more effectively, resulting in an obvious difference between the tone of the colours in the Hamzanama and the paintings executed on paper.  

In the royal art of Muslim culture, colours are usually visible more strong and bold. The Muslim painting enriched with bright colours, especially red and brilliant blue deserve special mention for their brilliance. Further use of softer and subtler colours like jade were very much appreciated. Colours in patterns of these paintings were combinations of rich floral and Geometric designs and were speciality of Mughal art. Colours used in miniature painting were very fanciful like jewels, blue rocks, and lavender houses in pursuance of Persian court style. In Muslim paintings, colours became increasingly naturalistic and artists used them to depict detailed scenes of nature, court crowds, battles and hunting places and other favourite objects of Mughals.

Arabic gum was used as a binding material in Indian pictures. Earlier animal glue was used for the purpose. Although the pigments have an opaque quality yet, Mughal and Rajput pictures were painted neither by tempera nor by gouache techniques. No traces of egg for tempera or zinc white for gouache have been found anywhere and pure pigments or their mixtures were ground in plain water to which Arabic gum was added as a binder. Basically, these pictures were made of pure water colours and their opacity was “due to the method of application rather than to the inherent character of the medium.”

Under Akbar and Jahangir the Mughal artists assiduously copied European prints and engravings. It is also well known that certain artists were
specialists in making outlines and some others in drawing figures or in colouring. Thus often a picture was a result of composite work of several artists. Master drawings, especially of popular subjects, were kept in the family of artists and they were repeatedly used with slight modifications. Knowing the reputation of Mansur painter, one is not surprised that his pictures relating to studies of animals were repeatedly copied by generations of ordinary artists who tried to sell them on as original works of the great master.

The purpose and social environment prevailing in the imperial Mughal Karkhanas was to expose minds and eyes of artists to fresh and lively experiences. The Mughal artists succeeded in creating a new style and a different aesthetic taste from their experiences and dwelling in these Karkhanas.

(i) Decoration in Muslim Paintings

Indian Muslim paintings throughout the country had common feature of beautiful decoration. Decorative patterns of immense beauty were very skillfully displayed in backgrounds of these paintings. Muslim paintings were amazingly ornamental evolving on marvelous geometrical and floral motifs and displayed excellent taste and wonderful combination of ideas and colours.

Floral motifs specially made from decorative, versatile and popular forms were too common. This practice was known in ancient India also but in Muslim period art of decoration of painting reached at its full zenith. It derived extensively from sophisticated Persian traditions and made wonderful and delicate improvements. This can be seen very well if a comparison is made
between Persian and Mughal paintings of similar background. In Mughal paintings use of decorative patterns and bright colours in heavy quantity make them more attractive. The Mughal artists artistically used leaf pattern in a brilliant style and variation of popular classical plants and their curving leaves was very much appreciated. They depicted vegetation on a flat background without light or shadow and in some other paintings they displayed beautiful imaginary plants made of elements borrowed from different types of floral patterns. The Iranian decorative art of using leaf scroll was adopted by Indian artists and it became a most versatile and decorative motif used by them.43

These paintings show a decorative combination of rich background and attractive borders. In Akbar’s reign we came across repetition of floral patterns on Shamiyanas and carpets depicted in arabesque ornamental style. ‘In Bahadur Shah II’s rule a remarkable natural illustration in muslim style was depicted in a painting called ‘Scales of Justice’. The most notable features of the painting were variation in form and placement of floral motifs and ornamentation of specific design of the balance’.44

Geometry has been a very important ingredient in Islamic art and its figures and construction have been extensively used by Muslim artists as meaningful symbols. In different Islamic designs geometrical patterns have played significant role to convey harmony balance and importance of religion. Thus geometry has become one of main characteristics of various Islamic arts. ‘Geometrical designs are basically very simple and they may be constructed with only a compass and a ruler and only a little knowledge of certain procedures to draw triangles, squares, hexagons, stars, etc. is required. The
designs may be reduced and enlarged with great ease. Like painting in architecture and calligraphy their use as background measures has been very common, and geometric patterns are freely used as symbols to denote various relations and combination. They make paintings interesting, rich, and beautiful.

During Sultanate period in Nimatnama a hexagonal manuscript having a dominant form in the background and beautiful floral pattern in upper space became a rare specimen of excellence. Some others paintings of Sultanate period, showing floral background with borders dominated by scrolling flowers are quite famous and their smooth materialistic feelings infatuate the viewers.

Floral as well as geometric patterns occupy a distinct place in Muslim order of decoration because all decorations and visual beauty lie in them. These patterns are spread on books covers, albums and borders and catch the eyes because they in a symbolic way convey or depict the beauty and grandeur of God.

Indian Muslim artists were faithful followers of Persian artists and copied their works but still they displayed some artistic deviations which transformed from father to son. These artists used superior quality of paper and colourful pigments and followed old as well as new styles and designs. Their new ideas and experiments were appreciated by the court as well as the masses. In domain of decorative form very little change has taken place and it still remains a distinct feature of rich Muslim paintings. We find that through floral designs and various patterns, Indian Muslim painters have retained fine balance and quality of impressive decoration in their paintings.
REFERENCES


2. That is the area covered by present day states of Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, parts of Afghanistan, Ladakh, Assam and Kashmir.


8. Ibid., pp. 21-22.


11. Ibid.


15. Milo C. Beach, op.cit., pp. 7-49.


20. Ibid.


26. Ibid., pp. 91-92.


31. Milo C. Beach, 2000, op.cit., p. 34.


34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., p. 105.


37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.


42. Ibid., p. 193.


