E-ISSN 2456-978X | Peer-Reviewed & Internationally Indexed Journal

CHITROLEKHA

JOURNAL ON ART AND DESIGN

Indexed and/or abstracted in

ProQuest Arts Premium Database | EBSCO Art & Architecture Source Database | Index Islamicus (Brill)
Dimensions (Digital Science) | EZB (Barcelona) | Fatcat | Scilit | COBISS

https://doi.org/10.21659/cjad.82.v8n203 | Vol 8 No 2 2024 | Dynamic Impact Dimensions

Insight

Kalakacarya-katha: A Jaina Monk's Tryst with the Scythians as Represented in the Illustrated Manuscripts from Western India

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Abstract:

The article discusses an ancient Jaina legend dating back 2000 years, which revolves around the abduction of a nun named Sarasvati by the king of Ujjayini, and the subsequent involvement of a Saka (Scythian) king in her rescue. The story was recorded in Prakrit and Gujarati a thousand years later and was illustrated and included in *Kalpasutra* manuscripts five hundred years after that. The article explores the illustrations from manuscripts commissioned in Western India, particularly Gujarat, for their patrons, the Sultanates of Jaunpur, Ahmedabad, and Malwa. These illustrations shed light on the storyline, highlighting the use of yogic power and moral themes, providing insight into the meaning behind the *Svetambara* sect's legend and its representation in Western Indian Art history.

Keywords: Jaina art, Jainism, Western Indian painting, Svetambara, non-canonical Jaina text, Kalakacaryakatha, Saka, Scythian, Kalpasutra.

Introduction: Understanding Western Indian Paintings

Indian miniature painting has many schools like Pahadi, Rajput, Mughal, Deccan, and many more. Among them, Western Indian painting is the earliest form of miniature painting. Focused on the depiction of Jaina religious texts from the 12th to the 16th century, many works from this school

Article History: Received: 28 September 2024. Revised: 02 October 2024. Accepted: 05 October 2024. Published: 06 October 2024.

Citation: Ghosh, S. 2024. *Kalakacarya-katha*: A Jaina Monk's Tryst with the Scythians as Represented in the Illustrated Manuscripts from Western India. *Chitrolekha Journal* 8:2 https://doi.org/10.21659/cjad.81.v8n203

originate in the state of Gujarat. Examples of this style are present in Uttar Pradesh and central India as well. This artistic tradition has continued to thrive nearly to the present day in Odisha, which is located on the eastern coast of India (Encyclopædia Britannica). The style is eye-catching and uses bright yet simple colors, stylized figures, and angular, wiry lines, not resembling earlier Indian wall paintings from which miniature paintings descended. The earliest paintings were created on palm leaves in an oblong format (12 by 4 inches), even after the introduction of paper in the late 14th century. Paper gave more writing space and working surface for illustrations to the scribe and artist, which produced a change in the character of the illustrations compared to those on the palm-leaf folios. ''The broad, simple lines of the earlier miniatures now give place to a more delicate, if often weaker, drawing and to an elaboration of the composition with minor elements and multiplication of detail. The miniatures of the paper period are more elegant, more sophisticated, and more decorative'' notes W. Norman Brown (Brown, 1933:1-2). Gold began to be used lavishly as well. By the end of the 13th century, the style had become well-established and did not change over the next 250 years. Figures are predominantly flat, with heads shown in profile. The facial features include a pointed nose; an important feature is the depiction of a "further eye," which extends beyond the facial outline (Encyclopædia Britannica). The preservation of Jaina manuscripts was done in *bhaṇḍaras* (libraries), set up by Jaina communities. Prosperous Jaina individuals commissioned these works. When the Muslim conquest of Gujarat happened in the late 13th century, more temples could not be built, and rich patrons commissioned illustrated manuscripts, which were embellished with the use of gold, as mentioned (Encyclopædia Britannica). Western Indian painting has an important place in Indian art history as it influenced the evolution of painting in India, especially in the Rajasthani schools in the western and central regions. The colour palette was interesting … ''Blue is more freely applied than in the palm-leaf period, thus giving a richer colour scheme, and is often used to form backgrounds, even in the fifteenth century. An old rose is used, and very rarely an ochre. Green still remains rare''…says W. Norman Brown (Brown, 1933:9).

***Kalakacarya-katha*: An Interesting Jaina legend**

Kalaka was a renowned Jaina monk who took help and assistance from a Saka king during a very deep personal predicament. How did the king help him? This captivating story is recounted in the *Kalakacarya-katha*, a non-canonical text of the Svetambara sect of Jainism, an important religion in India. It is usually found at the end of the 'Kalpasutras' by Bhadrabahu, the biographies of the

Tirthankaras, usually Mahavira and Parsvanatha (Srivastava, 2022). The Kalaka (or Kalakacarya) tales emerged mostly in the 12th/13th century CE, with various versions documented in languages such as Sanskrit, Prakrit, Apabhramsha, Gujarati, and other South Asian dialects. The legend mentions the Jaina, Kalaka, and his sister, Sarasvati, who joined the Jaina monastic order at an early age. He was highly learned, and she was a stunning beauty. She was a nun but was abducted by Gardabhilla, the king of Ujjayini. Kalaka went to the king and requested him to release her, but the king refused (Wikipedia). Since no local king helped him, he travelled across the Sindhu River to the western banks, and asked for help from Saka (Scythian) warriors. The Scythians agreed to help him because he displayed a certain magical power; the ability to convert their bricks into gold. They attacked Ujjayini, but the king of Ujjaini, too, had a magical donkey/she-ass. When it brayed loudly, the sound could kill a hundred soldiers at a time. In response to this Kalaka *muni* instructed the Scythian warriors to shoot arrows into the mouth of the braying donkey. The donkey was stopped from braying and could not kill anymore. Scythian soldiers and Kalaka were able to defeat the king and rescue Sarasvati. There are adaptations of this legend describing episodes from Kalaka's life: his collaboration with the Sakas to overthrow the king Gardabhilla of Ujjayini who had taken Kalaka's sister, the nun Sarasvati; the advancement of the Paryushana festival by one night; Kalaka's admonishment of the arrogant monk Sagaracandra and Kalaka's explanation of the *nigoda* doctrine about minute organisms in the presence of Shakra (Indra), the king of the gods.

Illustrated manuscripts of *Kalakacarya katha*: exemplifying Western Indian painting

The interesting tales of the Kalaka legend are contained in manuscripts with illustrations, serving as a valuable repository of the Western Indian miniature painting style from the 12th to the 16th century. It is mentionable here that three teachers named Kalaka inspired these tales. However, 20th-century research has established that there was only a singular Kalaka, identified with Arya Shyama, a historical figure who authored several texts and lived several decades prior to 57 BCE (Encyclopædia Britannica).

***Kalakacarya katha*: The tale in manuscripts**

Let us see the story through the main events as depicted in illustrations in the Western Indian style of painting (Brown, 1933:22).

The abduction of the nun Sarasvati. In the lower register are two nuns, one of them Sarasvati. Riding up to them on a horse is King Gardabhilla. In the upper register, King Gardabhilla appears at the left, his horse now having entirely different trappings, while in front of him is one of his soldiers carrying away Sarasvati.

Figure 1: Abduction of the nun Sarasvati, Kalakacarya Katha, 15th/16th century, Gujarat, Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan, U S A. Wikimedia Commons CC license.

Kalaka does magic: In the upper register Kalaka is sprinkling magic powder on the bricks and a Saka carries away a brick on his head. Below is the Sahi on horseback, with a Saka soldier in front of him with a pile of gold bricks on his head, carrying them away.

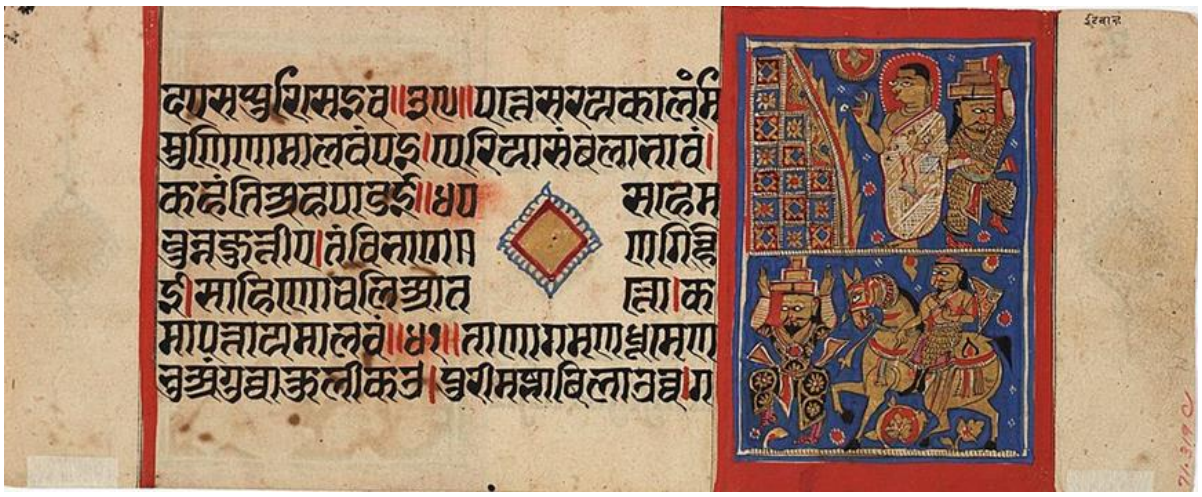

Figure 2: Kalaka converts the bricks to gold, folio from the Kalakacarya-katha, 14th/16th century, Gujarat, Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan, U S A. Wikimedia Commons CC license.

Kalaka and the Sahi: The 'Sahi' refers to one who came from 'Sagakula' (Sanskrit. Sakakula), that is, the Saka bank (of the Indus) or region, otherwise named *Pdrasakilla* (Persian bank) or *Pascimapdrs Bakula* (western bank). In many texts, it is said that these 'sahis' were called 'Sakas' because they came from the Saka region'' (Brown, 1933). 'The sahi' sits on a lion throne in a room with painted walls, holding his sword in his right hand. Three parasols are over him. Kalaka faces him, also in an architectural unit, and preaches. In front of Kalaka is the bowl which the overlord's messenger has brought. Above Kalaka is a 'Saka' with sword and shield, and below Kalaka are two more 'Sakas', standing with folded hands.

Figure 3: Kalaka and the Sahi, folio from the Kalakacarya Katha, 15th/16th century, Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan, U S A. Wikimedia Commons CC license.

The siege of Ujjaiyini: King Gardabhilla sits within the city wall of Ujjaiyini, depicted with a towered gate weaving his spells, and the she-ass (donkey) with magical powers appears before him standing upon one of the towers. Its mouth is wide open to bray. Above King Gardabhilla is the captive nun Sarasvati, who observes a fast so that she may be kept safe from the advances of Gardabhilla. Before her are two vessels. Outside the city wall are the besiegers, three Saka archers on foot with drawn bows, and Kalaka on horseback, also with drawn bow ready for battle.

Figure 4: The siege of Ujjaiyini, folio from a Kalakacarya Katha, 15th/16th century, Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan, U S A. Wikimedia Commons CC license.

Gardabhilla presented before Kalakacarya: The illustration shows the king being presented before the monk after he is defeated in battle with the Saka army.

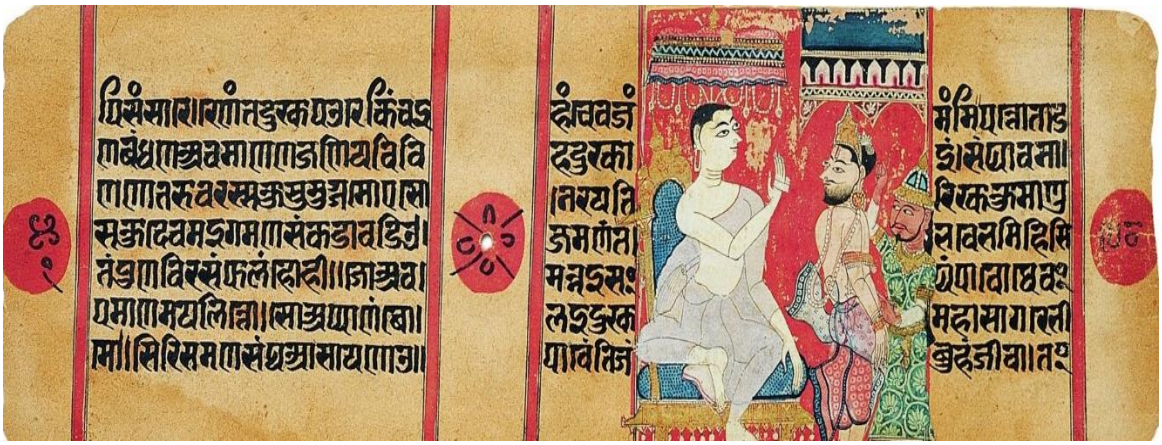

Figure 5: A captive Gardabhilla presented before Kalakacarya, folio from manuscript of Kalpasutra and Kalakacharya Katha, 14th century, Western India, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya. Mumbai, Maharashtra, India. Wikimedia Commons CC license.

The illustrated manuscript described above, along with its most popular storyline, reveals two things to the reader. One is that it exemplifies the Western Indian style of painting with its typical artistry, and the story has a yogic power element depicted as magic and a moral undertone. As W. Norman Brown mentions in his work of 1933:

> A second, and subordinate, reason for the importance attached to the legend of Kalaka is its moral lesson that he who labours for the eminence of the Faith obtains imperishable glory. A casuistic application is sometimes given this idea, to the end that if in so doing he

> should perform actions otherwise reprehensible, the purity of his purpose will nevertheless justify his conduct. Still another lesson taught by Kalaka's story is the value of having 'labdhi' (magic power acquired by Yoga); for with its aid Kalaka punished Gardabhilla. He further mentions… (Brown, 1933).

In many of the texts Kalaka has to expiate the wrathfulness and vengefulness of his dealings with King Gardabhilla, for these characteristics are sharply at variance with the ethics of Jainism." (Brown, 1933).

***Kalakacarya katha*: Recensions of the Legend**

Till now, the widely known story has been recounted. However, this tale has some recensions as well. It adds a new dimension to this legend of yore. Some of them have been found probably written or orally among monks. There is one incident that says that when Kalaka comes to the land of the Sahi, he finds a few boys crying around a well into which their ball has fallen while playing. Kalaka is supposed to have made a string of arrows by first piercing the ball and then each arrow one after the other to get the ball out. This is not mentioned in Bhavadeva's text of Samvat 1312 (one of the oldest) but in Samayasundara's later version of Vikram Sanvat 1666. There is one version that does not call the Sahis as Sakas, though it is mentioned that their region is Sagakula. Another version says that the Sahis came from the Saka bank, so they were called Saka kings. W. Norman Freeman mentions a 'Long anonymous version', Vinayachandra's version, Mahesvara Suri's version, Chandraprabha Suri's version, a few anonymous Sanskrit and Prakrit versions, Bhavadevasuri and Dharmaprabhasuri's versions as well. He mentions the Sriviravakya version as a popular one. The Hayapadiniyapayavo version in Prakrit mentions the king's (Garbhadhilla) name as 'Dapanna'. There seems to be a prose version of the story with few verses in Bhradeswasuri's *Kathavali* where Kalaka's sister is called 'Silamati' and Gardabhilla is 'Dapanna'. There is an additional character of Kalaka's nephew called Datta. There are also later compilation versions of the Kalaka tales in Gujarati and mixed Gujarati and Sanskrit (Brown, 1933).

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