

The Boats and Ships in the Indian Paintings: Examining the Commercial and Domestic Aspects in Maritime Activities

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ABSTRACT

Paintings are visual artefacts and one of the significant art narratives supplemented as a primary source in the construction or reconstruction of social and cultural lifeways of different periods since the Early Historic period—for example, the murals of Ajanta, Cholas, Vijayanagara, and the Mughal School of paintings. Among the diverse visual content, the Indian paintings consist of the depiction of the relationship between the water and humans in the forms of navigation activities through boats and ships of various kinds. Such images are further connected with social and economic aspects, which need to be examined and analysed to differentiate between domestic and commercial functioning. The analysis has been much on identifying trade-related activities and largely has ignored the other side of the social construct with the paintings bearing the marine activities. For example, the sailors and pilgrimage are on the riverside temples, and the boats and sailors in recreational activities. Which have been lesser known and studied. In this paper, the paintings in the collections of museums in Bihar shall be examined to narrate the visual craftsmanship surrounding the identity of boats and ships in detail, including but not limited to their forms/ models, designs, and their functions. Further, they are categorically examined and studied for commercial (interstate trades) or private uses (personal rides). The paintings in Rajput, Mughal, Patna Kalam, Boondi, Pahadi, Rajasthani, Kagada and Delhi School of Art, representing the beautiful boats and ships in different fabrics and shapes, are the focus of this study.

This paper is well fitted to session-29 because of the discussion on the riverine craft and associated activities. The paper deals with riverine craft i.e. boats and ships, which are illustrated on paintings of Rajput school of art, Patna school of art and Banaras school of art. Boats and ships are the obligatory part of marine activities and this paper well describes the function of boats along with design and discussion of similar riverine craft in ancient text.

INTRODUCTION

The association of human and water have been represented in different expressions like art, literature, Numismatic, epigraphy and travelers' accounts. Depicting boats and ships is a very prominent and favorite part of Indian art as well as a strong representation of Indian tradition. How boats and ships are imperative in Indian society could be seen in votive boat tradition in Odisha (Tripathi 2011, 1084), boat race in Kerala and so on. Out of these, Paintings are visual artefacts and one of the significant art narratives supplemented as a primary source in the construction or reconstruction of social and cultural lifeways of different periods since the Early Historic period. The purpose of this paper is to accomplish a comprehensive study of paintings in collections of Patna museum and Bihar museum for detailing out the types and functions of boats in Indian society.

CASE STUDY

Types of boats

The only recorded Sanskrit Sastric treatise which includes a section on ships, their classification and technical features and functions, is the *Yuktikalpataru*, preserved in the Calcutta Sanskrit College Library and first examined for its nautical interest by R. K. Mookerji in his pioneering 1912 publication *A History of Indian Shipping and Maritime Activity from the Earliest Times* (Mookerjee 1912). The *Yuktikalpataru* is a compilation of information on a variety of subjects, under the authorship of Bhoja Narapati. The identity of the author is unknown, but the extent to which the information it contains conforms to riverine boat type's points to an eastern Indian, probably Bengali, origin. It is believed to date from the fourteenth century but, like other prescriptive Sastric books of this type, no doubt embodied much older knowledge. An extensive list of boat types is provided, classified according to their size and to their suitability for different sailing conditions. The critical

distinction is between two classes of vessels, *Samanya* or "Ordinary", that is, river craft and *Vishesa* or "Special", that is, ocean-going vessels. The *Samanya* are subdivided into ten categories: *Ksudra*, *Madhyama*, *Bhima*, *Capala*, *Patala*, *Bhaya*, *Dirgha*, *Patraputa*, *Garbhara*, *Manthara* (Mukherjee 1912, 15). The boat which forms the subject of this paper broadly fits the *Madhyama* category under the river craft classification. This describes a vessel with a cabin in the centre (when it is identified under a further subdivision as *Sarvamandira* and *Madyamandira*), used as a pleasure boat by the king and suited for the rainy season. The *Yuktikalpataru* also details the appropriate colour for the masts, materials for metal fittings (gold, silver, copper), and the choice of figureheads drawn from the animal world, and the use of garlands to festoon the prows (Guy 1999, 106). These features can be seen clearly in a Bengal boat depicted in a nineteenth century Bengali patta painting of The Story of Gazi (Guy 1999, 110) as well as the paintings of Patna school of Art also known as Patna Kalam.

Sastric sources refer to the organization and regulation of both riverine and ocean trade. The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, for example, names the official post of *Navadhyaksa*, the Superintendent of Ships, whose duties included the customs control of ports, the provision of toll ferries and the assisting of vessels in distress. Other Sanskrit texts which concern themselves with ships and sailing are the *Abhidhanaratnamala* and the *Vaijayanti*. The activities of traders from such eastern Indian centres as Kausambi, Varanasi, Pataliputra, and Campa are recorded in the Buddhist Vinaya texts and Jatakas, supplying the Bengal port of Tamralipti (Ramachandran 1970, 79) on the mouth of the Ganges for the Southeast Asian trade. From the Gupta to Pala eras eastern India maintained large navies, and many battles were fought on the Ganges and its delta. The dual stimulus of commerce and warfare must have ensured a high level of ship building technology and skills in eastern India.

Royal Pleasure boats

The boats in this category are prolific in numbers in paintings of Patna Kalam. The deck of such boats has a number of interesting features with animals and birds' heads. Author found the boats with the shapes of peahens, lions, sea monsters or crocodile and hoarse. A decorated cabin is erected on the centre of the vessel, where royal persons are enjoying the trip. A flag is flowing at the last corner of each ship and may represent the province. At the bottom of the flag oarsmen are stirring the pedals and moving the ship ahead. A whisk man is blowing the whisk and his face is toward the prow (Fig. 1).

These types of boats represent the *Survmandira* type of ships as per the *Yuktikulptaru*. (Mookerjee 1912:18) Such kinds of boats have the largest cabin extending from one end of the ship to the other and are used for transport royal treasures, horses and women. The text gives elaborate information for decorating and furnishing such kinds of vessels. The prows of ships admit of a great variety of fanciful shapes and forms: these comprise the heads of lion, buffalo, serpent, elephant, tiger, birds, such as duck, peahen, or parrot, the frog, and man thus arguing a great development of the art of the carpenter or the sculptor. Other elements of decoration are pearls and garlands of gold to be attached to and hung from the beautifully shaped prows (Mookerjee 1912, 17). Four kinds of metals are recommended for such kinds of ships: gold, silver, copper and compounds of all three.

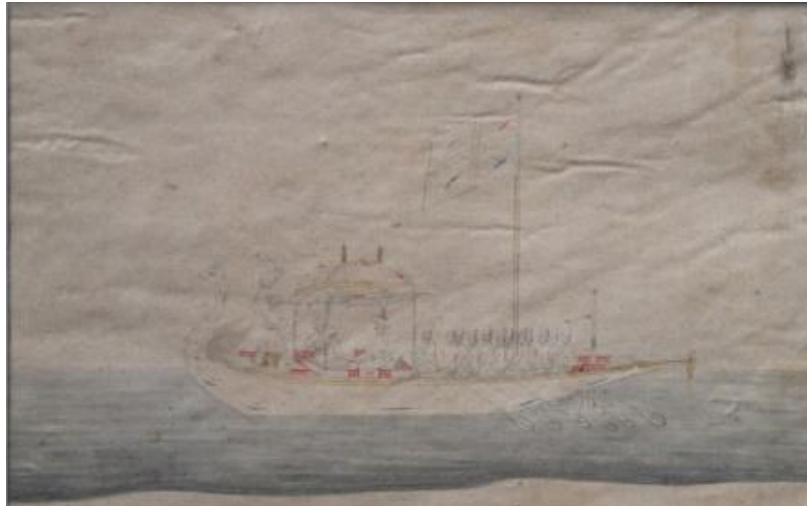


Figure 1 : Peacock shaped royal pleasure boat, in collection of Patna Museum

The convention of having an animal, natural or mythical, as a figurehead is a feature of ceremonial vessel design from the earliest times in India, as witnessed by the relief on the western gateway at Sanchi Stupa no. 1, in which a sandstone relief medallion depicts a pleasure boat with a pavilion, the bow represented in the form of a mythical winged gryphon, and the raised stern as the tail of an aquatic creature. It is interesting to note that it records the involvement of the Satavahana king Satakami through an inscription left by his chief of works (Harle 1986, 34, n. 37). The Satavahana dynasty of the western Deccan actively supported the maritime ventures of their Buddhist merchants and clearly pleasure boats were a part of royal life in this early period (Ray 1986).

The earliest depiction of a boat in Indian sculpture, to be found in a decorated roundel of the Bharhut stupa railing of the second century BC, shows two vessels (one disappearing into the jaws of a ferocious sea-monster or *makara*) with steeply rising prow and stern sections, constructed of broad planks of timber secured with what appear to be metal staples but in reality was more probably fibre stitching. The vessel is without masts and appears only to be propelled by two oars not dissimilar to those seen in our model. One can surmise that this scene depicts the perils of sea travel as undertaken by enterprising Buddhist and other merchants (and monks) in the Mauryan and Sunga periods (fourth-first centuries BC) and recounted in the Buddhist canonical literature, notably in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, and in the later Buddhist literature, including the *Jataka* stories¹ (Guy 1999, 107).

In one of Patna Kalam paintings, a big vessel resting at the bank of a river along with attendants of some royal person, might be waiting for their lord/queen with a decorated palanquin. Boat comprises a single mast and a big cabin with a golden throne. Shapes of such boats show the function of pleasure trips.

In another painting, there is a big boat being ridden by a royal man and his subordinates. The royal person is sitting at the centre of the cabin and others are sitting around him. Prow of the hull portion is in the shape of a mermaid. Boat is a single mast which is topped by a flag and a sail. Two helmsman are shown in boat, one is maintaining the sail as per the direction of wind and another one is stirring a long handle peddle at other last corner of the boat.

¹ Judging from the frequent references to stitched hull construction as a feature of Indian ship building, it may be assumed that this is the method being employed in the Bharhut relief.



Figure 2: Royal pleasure boats, in collection of Patna Museum

In figure 2, there are nine decorated boats with a single cabin at centre, single mast and sail. These colourful boats perfectly show a scene of pleasure trips in river Ganga. The painting of Banaras school of art must show the scene of Banaras *Ghat* (Bank of the river Ganga)

Royal ceremonial boat

Shape and design of boat in fig no 3 best fits it with the *Madhyamandira* category as per *Yuktikulptaru* which are used by kings (Mookerji 1912, 18). The painting of Rajput school of art represents a scene of some festival. In the courtyard of the palace, royal women are preparing for ritual and decorating idols of goddess (Parvati?) few are keeping the idol over their head and blowing fly-whisk. Another beautiful part of this painting is a royal boat which is made of wood and painted red in colour. It is surmounted by an open pavilion which is in the shape of *chattari* (umbrella) and resting upon the four columns. Three decorated staircases are connected to the pavilion to rest part of the boat. A King is sitting under the pavilion and looking at the ceremony/festival, he might have come to attend the ceremony. Oarsmen are stirring the boat and a helmsman is standing at the last corner of the boat. Two umbrella and palm leaf fan bearers are up righting between the oarsmen and helmsman. The Stern section is in the shape of a swan.

However, a relief sculpture of a similar boat in the Indian Museum, Calcutta, throws light on the identity of this device. The relief has an umbrella bearer mounted on the standing figure of an elephant, both of which have royal affiliations. It may be that this device is not a vase but an attempt to represent the umbrella (*chattari*) in the round (the sculptor has obviously not dared to cut away the stone around the umbrella's post). The elephant figurehead is flanked by two attendants, one holding a fly-whisk (*chamar*), the other a palm-leaf fan (*taal pakka*). The final feature of this vessel is the *mandapa*-type super-structure, a pavilion supported by four turned columns and a two-tiered pitched roof with capping finial. This covered pavilion houses three seated figures: a warrior with a bow (on the port side), a bearded priest holding a rosary (facing starboard) and a figure in princely attire in the centre, facing the prow. Interestingly, in the Calcutta relief, the side of the pavilion depicted shows the warrior figure. I shall return to the possible symbolism of this ship and its royal passenger, but first I want to situate this vessel in the long tradition of Indian royal pleasure barges reaching back at least to the Satavahana period of the early centuries AD (Guy 1999, 107).



Figure 3: Royal ceremonial boat, in collection of Patna Museum

Merchant, Rider boats

Paintings of Patna Kalam are designated by the merchant and rider boats. The hull of merchant boats looks huge. In fig no 4 merchant boats are shown with single mast and sail and overloaded with goods, along with that two rider boats appear with elongated cabins at the centre. Roof of the cabin is downwards. Rider boats are useful for river traffic and that are the lifeline of contemporary societies. One of the rider boats in the painting shows an interesting feature. A medium size boat is resting at the bank of the river. Boat has a single mast which is topped by a flag and another flag erects at the other last corner which shows its possession by high class. Two mariners are sitting upon the deck of the boat and other three are cooking food at the surface of the river bank.



Figure 4: Merchant and Rider type boats, in collection of Patna Museum

Fishing boats

Fig. No 5 in paintings, represents the living scenes of fish boats in different river banks of Bihar. Such kinds of boats are small in size and sometimes show a small cabin at the centre.



Figure 5 : Fishing boats, in collection of Patna Museum

RESULTS

Describing the marine activities through the narratives is an exciting part as it echoes the context. Paintings of Patna Kalam, Rajput school of art and Banaras school of art well captured the scenes of marine activities and river crafts. Colorful and enormously designed boats show the passion of artists and classifications of classes in contemporary society as well as the occupations. Animal headed boats show the affluent classes. Horse, sea monster, mermaid, peacock, lion headed boats are instances of wonderful craftsmanship. This is noteworthy that most of the artist in Patna Kalam paintings captured the scenes of decorated boats with pleasure trips by royal persons, an eye catchy view of boats could be the reason for so but the unvarying marine activities like riding boats for ordinary people, merchant boats and fishing boats also could get a space in painting. The comparative study of these boats in paintings with prescribed boats in ancient text gives a consolidation to this paper.

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