

Convergences and Divergences in Chughtai's Nationalist Art: A Reappraisal

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The celebrated artist, Abdur Rehman Chughtai (1894-1975), who resided in Lahore, has been claimed by diverse quarters as 'their' own, mainly because of the enchanting art he created and the reputation he commanded. During the early 20th century when he began to paint, the influential Bengal School that moulded the nationalist aesthetic taste of the British India, often emphasised that Chughtai was a protégé of this School as far as his aesthetic vision went. This was because the 'Academy art' style propagated by the British Art Colleges at Kolkata, Madras, Bombay and Lahore was made popular by Raja Ravi Varma. In reaction to this, the nationalist Bengal School started a movement of fusing modern wash technique with Japanese ink painting and the pre-modern art traditions of the British India such as the Mughal and Rajput miniatures, Ajanta murals and the folk art styles. Abanindranath Tagore, nephew of the Nobel Laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore, was its most influential exponent.

Similar to the practice of the Bengal School, Chughtai also fused Japanese ink paintings with the wash technique and his themes were often traditional Hindu, Mughal or Persian in content. In more recent times, the most major exponent of this idea has been the notable art historian Partha Mitter (1994). This notion of the legacy of the Bengal School nationalism being carried at Lahore through Chughtai's art has been very dominant in the history of nationalist art in colonial India. However, after the partition of Pakistan and India, Chughtai continued to work from Lahore and hence, both postcolonial India and Pakistan have since referred to him as a Pakistani painter, he being the most celebrated artist of independent Pakistan. Because of the Mughal and Persian themes of his paintings, it has often been stressed on both sides of the Indo-Pak border that his paintings carried the legacy of the Mughal miniature tradition (see for instance Dadi 2006; Mitter 1994).

A close look at the paintings of Chughtai and whatever is known about his biography, however, reveals more about the convergent and divergent ideas in his art than what has been emphasised so far by various authors. First, it must not be forgotten that Chughtai was a product of the Mayo College of Art at Lahore and later also taught at the Mission School at Gujranwala, having been appointed there by Lionel Heath, the Principal of Mayo College of Art. Hence, even though his art showed dominant trends from Mughal and Persian themes, his art may not have been so much a reaction to the Academy art style as that of the Bengal School. Indeed, it has often been emphasised in writings of Pakistani art that Chughtai was not a product of the Bengal School (Dadi 2006: 52). Rather, it has also been stressed that the Bengal School developed differences with Chughtai (*Muraqqa-i Chughtai* 1928/1971: Introduction), even though he travelled to Calcutta and met Rabindra Nath Tagore. Iftikhar Dadi notes that Chughtai himself considered his art to be of the tradition of the Lahore School of Painting, which he regarded as a continuing legacy of the Mughal miniature tradition and that in his later career he was influenced by the pan-Islamic ideas of the poet Allama Muhammad Iqbal (Dadi 2006: 52-53).

Certain ideas emerge from all this debate about the influences on Chughtai's art. First, this great artist himself did not consider himself to be a protégé of the Bengal School and second that rather than

a reaction to the Academy art of the art colleges of the British, his focus was more on continuing the pre-British tradition prevalent at Lahore, which he regarded as the living tradition of the Mughals – he taught at a British art institution is important here, as it shows that during this phase of his career, Chughtai may not have been opposed to the British notions of art practice, even though he did not follow them himself. His contemporaries and subsequent generations found in his art an inspiration for the evolving nationalist sentiments of undivided India at first and then of independent Pakistan is an additional influence that his art generated. Moreover, it has often been ignored that Chughtai painted Hindu, Buddhist as well as Persian and Mughal themes. In this sense, his art is a common legacy for both Pakistan and India or rather for the whole of the South Asian subcontinent. The reason why he painted Persian and Mughal subjects after partition was that he lost his patrons from the Indian side of the subcontinent after partition and not that he developed any aversion for non-Muslim themes. In fact, during partition, he had often faced the prospect of being killed himself while defending the Hindu and Sikh people (pers. comm. Arif Rehman Chughtai, son of Abdul Rehman Chughtai, dated 01.02.2008). This in sharp contrast to Iftikhar Dadi's assertion that he followed Iqbal's pan-Islamic ideas towards the latter part of his career (Dadi 2006: 52-53). Any idea of inward-looking religious fundamentalism would have been anathema to Chughtai.

Since Chughtai painted many Hindu themes, it has often been stressed that he drew his inspiration from Rajput miniatures as well. This paper attempts to study his paintings *Radhika* and *Holi* and compare them with some Rajput paintings of the same theme to see if the evidence of the art bears this out. Chughtai's representation of Holi (Figure 1) at once strikes as a true festival of colours, in that he has used bright colours to show the festive celebrations. Besides, the man and the woman in the foreground to some extent borrow from Radha-Krishna imagery but he has also changed their images – the man wears a lotus in his hair and not the usual peacock feather – suggesting these could be any couple playing with colours. The entire visual frame is infused with romance, emotion and the playfulness associated with the festival of Holi. They are real people, not divine beings engaging in the revelry of colours. In this sense, Chughtai enhances the real emotions and the mood associated with Holi, rather than just making a stylised statement of the festival – and because of this reason, his painting is very modern in its mood. No miniature painting of Holi – either Mughal or Rajput style, has this kind of realistic emotionality highlighted in the visual frame.

For a comparison, let us take an 18th century representation of Holi celebration from Himachal (Figure 2). This painting is very stylised in the typical miniature tradition, with figures arranged in a circle. Radha and Krishna are clearly recognizable on left, throwing colours at other cowherdesses, while on the right are also seen Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha and attendants engaging in the same festival. While a lot of red has been used, the colour scheme is much more subdued here than in Chughtai's Holi. Of course, that is also because miniature painters had access to only vegetable dyes while Chughtai could use a greater array of colours. But more than that, the Himachal miniature shows the festival of colours as the makers of this art would visualise the divine figures at play in the Rajput courtly environment – the enhanced emotionality, romance and playfulness of Chughtai could not be possible in the regulated courtly environment of 18th century. The two paintings are completely different in their depiction of mood and also in the composition of the event.

Chughtai's *Radhika* (Figure 3) is also illuminating of his immense understanding of human moods. His Radhika is stealing away in the silence of the night to meet her beloved Krishna, who is not in the visual frame. The lamp on the left alludes to the night time and Radhika's pose suggests she is trying to hide herself from the public gaze and also her shyness due to the rendezvous she is going to have. Is she going to offer the lotus to Krishna or is she going to adorn herself with it? It is not clear from the painting, but the lotus enhances the softness of the moment depicted here. Once again is seen the heightened emotionality and mood in Chughtai's art. This kind of psychological depiction of an event came about in the South Asian sub-continent only in the modern period, even though the themes chosen by Chughtai may have been from various stages of South Asian history and mythology.

The theme of the meeting of Radha and Krishna abound in the Rajput miniature painting tradition and it is not possible to categorise the innumerable paintings found on this theme. However, just by way of making a comparison, I have taken a painting again from 19th century Kangra court in Himachal (Figure 4). This kind of composition is very frequently represented in the miniature painting traditions of India. Again, this miniature shows the stylised, measured mannerisms of a courtly culture. Krishna is being attended by a woman in a grove while Radha arrives to meet him in company of a friend. Of course, Radha is shown as approaching Krishna shyly, but the stealthy Radha treading quietly in the silence of the night as conceptualised by Chughtai is not possible in this ambience, where a heroine is always accompanied by her friend and the hero and heroine both are always waited upon by attendants. Besides, here Krishna has a halo around his head, showing his divine status.

Indeed, these miniatures were made as a result of the spread of the devotional ideology of Hinduism known as *Bhakti*. As the saints and their *Bhakti* texts, travelled from one court to another, the paintings showing the saints' visualisation of the exploits of Rama and Krishna began to be commissioned by the rulers of these Rajput principalities who wanted to patronise the religion as well as the artists. Hence, these paintings are really the visual depictions of the poems composed by the saints, which describe the life of Krishna and Radha. The divine content and the measured atmosphere of a courtly life are an inevitable part of these paintings. On the other hand, Chughtai was painting in the atmosphere of early 20th century, when the courtly patronage had disappeared and the independent painter as the signatory of a new India had emerged. This was also the time when the visualisation of realistic expression, moods and emotions was being taught in the Academies of art following the Western aesthetic ideals. Hence, even though Chughtai chose his themes from pre-modern history and mythology and he wanted to keep the heritage of his place and culture alive, his art really shows the heightened emotions – something that was possible only in 20th century South Asia. His paintings also show his deep understanding of the human psychology and his ability to show it visually in a powerful manner. In this sense, I feel his art is very modern and very reflective of his own personal style. It is time to rethink the long-propagated notions of Chughtai's paintings being derivatives of the miniature tradition – they are so only in content, not at all in representation.

Bibliography

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Figure 1: Chughtai's Holi.



Figure 2: An 18th century Holi.

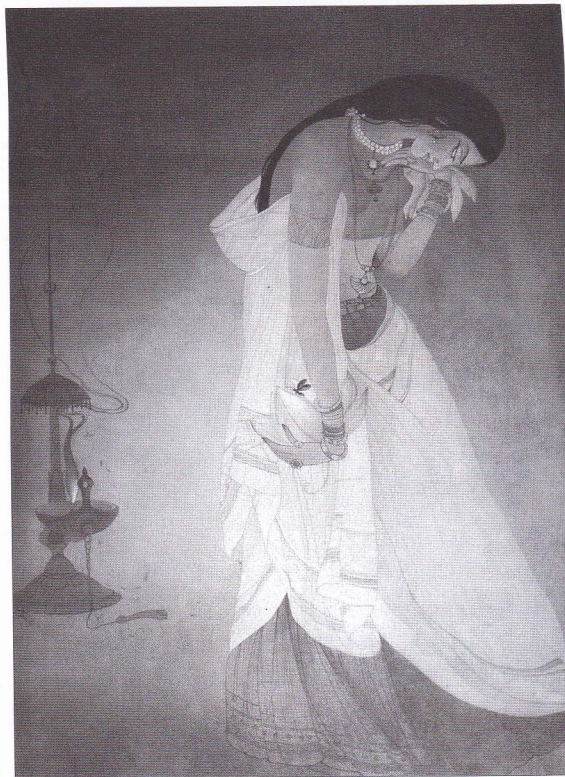


Figure 3: Chughtai's Radhika.



Figure 4: Radha going to meet Krishna (Kangra, 1830-35).