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NAMAVALI SHAWL IN INDIAN PAINTINGS: TRAVERSING TILL THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract:

Paintings and sculptures, especially the early ones, showcasing daily life, are useful to study for learning about society and its people. In India, from the paintings of different eras, we may come to know about the social, religious, and cultural life of a particular period and region. Namavali shawls are those ritualistic shoulder clothes, woven or printed in multifarious materials and worn by the Indian Hindu priests or devotees, preferably males, performing ceremonial rites. These shawls are also termed as Ramanami dupattas, in the northern and western part of India. In many states, including West Bengal, other than worships, these are also used to cover the heavenward corpse, during his last journey. It can be assumed that the tradition of using namavali shawls, started with the Bhakti movement emerging in India during the 15th Century. As the Vaishnavite culture flourished in eastern India with Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the sixteen word 'Hare Krishna' mantra became famous. Therefore, it started appearing on the namavali shawls too. In the paintings titled 'Bhakta Chhipa, the devout cloth printer', 'Raja Balwant Singh of Raghogarh with his son Jai Singh worshipping Rama and Sita', 'Lady on the Steps' and 'Three Women performing propitiatory and purificatory rites by the River Bank', the painters has showcased namavali shawl as an important element, to emphasize more on the central characters of the paintings. So, these paintings are undoubtedly great treasures of Indian Art.

Artworks, including paintings, sculptures, even installations, represent the inner vision of artists. The artists are the visual recorders of the people, places, and events of their time and places, which are later transformed into their artworks. They express their feelings, their views, and their perceptions through creative skills on any medium of their choice. Through their artworks, we get to see the world in a new or innovative way. That is why, paintings and sculptures, especially

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the early ones, showcasing daily life, are good to study, to know about certain things, like the society and its people, their lifestyle, clothing, nature, flora, and fauna etc. In India, from the paintings of different eras, we may come to know about the social, religious, and cultural life of a particular period and region, as mentioned by the artist. The early miniature paintings could be good examples in this regard for studying such things.



Namavali shawls are those ritualistic shoulder clothes, woven or printed in multifarious materials and worn by the Hindu priests or devotees, preferably males, performing any ceremonial rite. These shawls are also termed as *Ramanami dupattas*, in some of the states in northern and western India. As Lord Rama is mostly worshipped and revered in those states, so, most of these sacred shawls are dedicated to Him. It is believed that covering the upper part of the body with these shawls, makes the soul purified and sanctified. Thus, people started using these fabrics during religious occasions. Even at present too, these are widely used by the Indian Hindus, no matter which deity they are devoted to. In many states, including West Bengal, these are also used to cover the heavenward corpse, during his last journey only to symbolize his smooth union with the divine Lord. So, these fabrics are considered as an important part of everyday life. The actual history regarding the production and use of these shawls, could not be traced but it may be assumed that the tradition of using *namavali* shawls started with the Bhakti

movement emerging in India during the 15th Century¹. In different regions, with the teaching of Saints like Sri Chaitanya, Guru Nanak, and others, people started getting attracted to spiritualism. As the Vaishnavite culture flourished in eastern India with Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the sixteen word 'Hare Krishna' mantra (i.e. *Hare Krishna Hare Krishna/ Krishna Krishna Hare Hare/ Hare Rama Hare Rama/ Rama Rama Hare Hare*) got famous. Therefore, it started appearing on the *namavali* shawls too. But these Hindu prayer shawls produced during the Bhakti Movement could not be found, as it is hard to preserve textiles for long in a humid climate as India has. Thanks to a few museums in India and abroad, the *namavali* shawls produced during the nineteenth and twentieth century can be seen. Earlier, it was mostly woven and used only by the members of royal families who were capable enough to patronize the weavers to weave such majestic ritualistic shawls. They kept in mind about certain restrictions regarding the fabrics. The tradition continued, until the 1960s and 70s, when the use became widespread with the low-cost printed *namavali* shawls. Everyone could afford them now. Getting attracted to Hindu spiritualism, the Indian hippies also had worn them, especially at the famous pilgrim centers in India. Even upper garments bearing sacred chants became a new trend of fashion then and is continuing even now.



Plate 2

Painting depicting priest worshipping Rama and Sita in the presence of Raja Balwant Singh (1770-1778) and his son Jai Singh

Eighteenth century

Raghogarh Style of painting, Central India

Painting on paper,

National Museum, New Delhi Collection, Accession Number 51.71/218

Many Indian artists used *namavali* shawls in their artworks, including paintings, to signify the importance of these sacred fabrics in daily life. Through these shawls, they tried to express the feeling of devotion for the almighty. From the Mughal period to contemporary times, this fabric piece has always been portrayed on different mediums by various artists. The *namavali* shawls showcased mostly, are dedicated to Lord Rama, the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu, in Hindu mythology. There are also *Namavali* shawls in dedication to both Lord Rama and Krishna, the trend of which is largely followed in eastern India, especially West Bengal.

Among the paintings, the most significant one is the Guler painting titled '*Bhakta Chhipa, the devout cloth printer*'², C 1800-1810 (See Plate 1). 'Chhipa' is the term used for the professional block printer in Western India. It is an interesting fact that in spite of being painted by a Pahari Miniature painter, this painting with full of minute details, had showcased a block-printer from western India. The main character in this picture, the *bhakta* (devotee), Nama by name, and a block printer by caste and profession³ is printing line after line of the words 'Shri Rama', with a wooden block on a yellow piece of cloth.

It seems that the printer is totally absorbed in the thoughts of God. The look on his face, the distant expression, reveals that he has lost all his earthly awareness. This impressive painting is created by an artist belonging to the Nainsukh (renowned Guler painter) family. Here the artist could have shown the printer, printing any other cloth. But the painter had tried to show how the *Namavali* fabrics were printed then, with complete devotion of the printer to the almighty.



Plate 3
 'Lady on the Steps'
 Artist: Bhavani Charan Law
 Medium: Oil on Canvas
 Dimension: 72X58 cm.
 Courtesy: Bid and Hammer, Fine Art Auctioneers

The miniature painting, “*Raja Balwant Singh of Raghogarh with his son Jai Singh worshipping Rama and Sita*”⁴, dated C 1795 A D, painted in Raghogarh style from the collection of the National Museum, New Delhi (Acc. No. 51.71/218), also needs a special mention here (See Plate 2). In this painting, Raja Balwant Singh of Raghogarh, along with his son Jai Singh, is in the worship of Lord Rama and Sita in the presence of priests. The main priest standing at the right wears a *namavali* shoulder cloth and a turban. Both the *namavali* shawl and the turban are white in colour upon which the word 'Rama' is written repeatedly in red. Here the *namavali* is shown as the ritualistic cover for the upper body. The calm and devoted gesture of the priest is justified by his clothing. The miniature paintings, mentioned above, help us to assume that *namavali* shawls were produced and used in the northern part of India, as well as in western India during an early period when these miniature paintings were created.

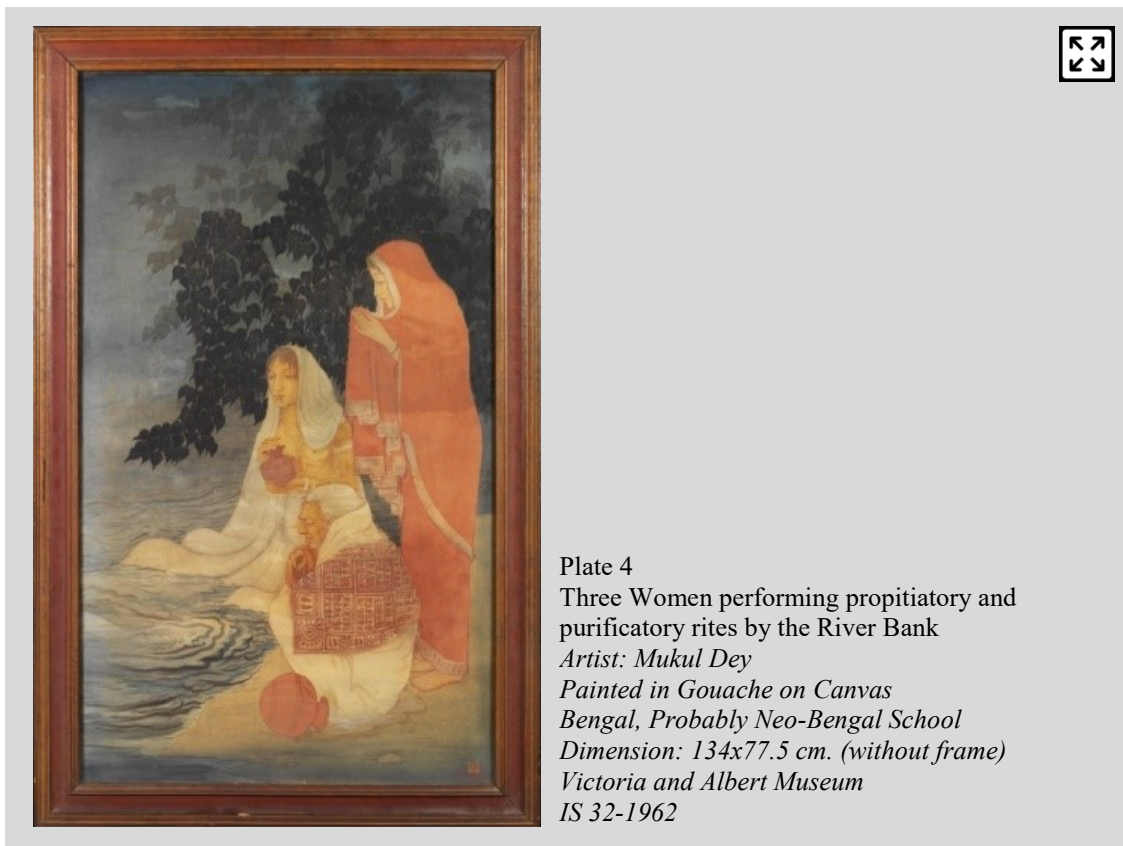


Plate 4
 Three Women performing propitiatory and purificatory rites by the River Bank
 Artist: Mukul Dey
 Painted in Gouache on Canvas
 Bengal, Probably Neo-Bengal School
 Dimension: 134x77.5 cm. (without frame)
 Victoria and Albert Museum
 IS 32-1962

In two more paintings, artists used *namavali* shawl as an important element of the subject matter of their paintings. In the painting titled, 'Lady on the Steps'⁵, the artist, Bhavani Charan Law, painted the main and sole character, an aged widow, seated on the steps of an architectural building in a gloomy atmosphere around (See Plate 3). Draped in a white saree, with a shaven head and holding a pouch bearing the string of prayer beads (*Japamala*) in her right hand, the widow is clad in a *namavali* shawl in her upper body. Though the inscriptions on the

shawl could not be seen, the colour and the motifs represent the fabric to be a *namavali* shawl. The artist used the fabric symbolically to express the devotion of the widow towards the almighty. During the 19th century there was a trend of Bengali widows to move to the holy city of Vrindavan near Mathura (both places are associated with Lord Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu), and Kashi/ Varanasi (place associated with Lord Shiva), leaving everything behind and dedicate herself to the divine Lord. They led their life there only with the thought of God. The widow painted in this Oil on Canvas painting, looks weary of life. While in another painting, titled 'Three Women performing propitiatory and purificatory rites by the River Bank'⁶ painted by Mukul Dey, three women had been shown offering worship at the Ganges (See Plate 4). Among them, an old aged widow had been portrayed, wrapped by a *namavali* shawl on her upper body. She along with two other ladies in the painting, is performing some rituals at the bank of river Ganges, the river which is considered as the holy river in India. The old widow is sitting in front, facing the river. She is also wearing a white saree and looks a little absent-minded. Here in both the paintings, the old aged widows have worn *namavali* shawls to signify their devotion to the Lord, by surrendering themselves to him.

These are only a few examples, where *namavali* shawls can be seen through paintings. But there are many more, I believe. These paintings are indeed a source of information regarding the usage of *namavali* fabrics in respect of socio-religious life. Here lies the greatness of the painters who created these beautiful paintings. So, these paintings are undoubtedly great treasures of Indian Art.

References & Notes

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²Goswami, B. N. and Fisher E. (2009). *Pahari Masters Court Painters of Northern India*. Niyogi Books. New Delhi. Plate 152. p 353.

³Ibid. p 352.

⁴Miniature painting - Raja Balwant Singh of Raghogarh with his son Jai Singh worshipping Rama and Sita, C 1795 A, [30.5 cm x 44 cm.], paper. Acc No. 51.71/218, New Delhi: National Museum.

⁵'Lady on the Steps' by BhavaniCharan Law, Oil on Canvas, C 1880-1946), [72 cm x 58 cm.], Bid and Hammer (Fine Art Auctioneers),
Link:<https://auctions.bidandhammer.com/bhavani-charan-law#.XjMJ32gzZPY>

⁶'Three women performing propitiatory and purificatory rites by the river bank' by Mukul Dey. Gouache on Canvas, C 1922 (probably Neo-Bengal School). [134 cm x 77.5 cm.], Acc. No. IS.32-1962, Victoria and Albert Museum. London.
Link: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O106231/painting-dey-mukul/>