

## CHAPTER 4

### TRACING THE ARTIST- THE CONTRIBUTORS OF THIS TRADITION

Having dealt with a wide range of materials in the third chapter, an attempt has been made in this session to trace the artists who were contributing to the painting traditions. Be it the miniatures or the frescoes, today a large number of them are referred to as ‘Kamangari Kalam’ by the people of Kutch. This terminology comes from ‘Kamangar’, a bow-making Muslim community that resided in Kutch. Their extensive participation in the art activity of this region, must have influenced the people to address the art activity as Kamangari works/ Kamangari Kalam. Nevertheless, the questions that are being raised are: Is this terminology appropriate? Or a more loosely coined terminology? Did the Kamangars contribute to the court tradition, or did they work only on the frescos? If they did work on paintings, how did they learn the technique of fresco making and painting on *wasli*? What was their style of painting? A profusely large number of works done on walls and manuscripts needed familiarity with Hindu Iconography. How did the Kamangar’s familiarize themselves with Hindu iconography? A brief note on the native artists by Mrs. Postan (an English Guest), in her travelogue<sup>50</sup>, comments that she likes to believe that, ‘the Hindu artists were more adaptive in learning than Mahomedans who were restricted to create God’s creations’. Encountering such questions also raises the probability that more artist communities must have engaged with the tradition, but are unacknowledged. As a response to these questions raised, it was important to investigate deeper into this area of ambiguity. Hence this chapter, the first section titled ‘Kamangars’ traces the origin of the artist community in Kutch, and the second section speculates to understand the artist based on the quality of draftsmanship.

#### **Kamangars – The Known Painters of Kutch**

As mentioned above most of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century paintings, be it the once on paper, or the murals, today are referred as Kamangari kalam. But Kamangars as a community are largely referred to as fine skilled bow-makers and shield-makers from Delhi. From a bow making community, to enhance the sophisticated skill of a painter is

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<sup>50</sup> A detailed note of her comment is attached in the later part of the chapter. Cutch, or Random Sketches of Western India

unusual though, but not impossible. Hence an attempt is made in this session, to assimilate information on the role of this community in Kutch society. First written reference to this community appears in 1880 Gazetteer of Kutch. It states:

“Shield-making and painting: There are in Bhuj about 15 musalman families of painters, Kamangars who are said to have come from Delhi. They make toys, shields, and sticks and colour them with different dyes. Shield making, is one of the special cutch industries. The Kamangars import rhinoceros and elephant hide from Zanzibar, work them into semitransparent discs of various sizes, paint them, and without any help from leather workers mount them as shields. The fewer the flaws and stains, the greater the value of the shield. Measuring generally about 2.5 ft across the rhinoceros shields vary in price from 2s to 10 pounds (rs 1-100) those for nobles and chiefs are gold or silver mounted and sometimes studded with gems. Shield makers have no particular busy season and in the rains are more or less idle, their average daily earnings are about 1s (as 8) they keep yearly 11 holidays and though hardworking and thrifty are not able to save.”

Interesting to note here is the title itself, which says ‘shield making and painting’. This is the earliest written record to a painting/painter that we come across for this region. Here Kamangar’s contribution to painting on toys, sticks, and shields are highlighted as much as their profession of shield-making. Although there is no direct reference to these families as trained court or fresco artists, nor mention of their painterly contributions. What is interesting is that they are primarily addressed as a finely skilled artist and a hardworking community, with a readiness to adapt to alternate art practices.

Dr. Goswamy during his research could trace few references which could indicate their involvement in court painting traditions. One is a Darbar painting of Rao Lakhpat reign (Plate III).<sup>51</sup> In this eighteenth-century painting of Rao Lakhpat with his darbar men, the scholar could identify a figure standing, inscribed as *Kamangar*, among *Khidmatgars* and *Khawases*. As observed by him, ‘the portfolio’, which the figure holds in his hand reminds of the *kalamdaan* which is usually attached to the belt of a painter in Mughal paintings. This might indicate to some degree of his occupation at the court. Another is an inscriptional reference to ‘Khwaju Hassan Kamagar’ along with other illegible Muslim names behind a standing portrait of Raja Abhay Singh of Jodhpur, from the Kutch collection.

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<sup>51</sup> Goswamy B.N, and Dallapiccola A.L, 1983, *Opcit*.

Around 1971, yet another affirmative statement gets recorded in the Gazetteer of Kutch on these communities' painting contribution. Which states:

“Kutch has its style of painting known as Kamangari, it was developed during the time of Lakhaji II. Old and modern specimens of Kamangari work are found everywhere in Kutch. Kamangaras have produced the best specimen of mural decoration preserved in the Aaina palace, in the bungalow of Mac Murdo in Anjar, in the Bhandara of Dharamnath at moti rayan, in the Akhada of Jangi at Dhrang and in Bhuj Museum. Animals, birds, leaves, flowers, and creeper, incidents of everyday life, scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, elephant fights, and deer hunting have been painted with extraordinary grace and charm giving full play to their imagination. Horses, camels, elephants in a royal procession painted in Sujaba's residence, and a picture of a mother and child in the Ayna Palace are life-like. The influence of the Rajput and Moghul styles of painting is noticeable in the paintings in Ayna Palace. These colourful mural Paintings dating back to about 140 years give a good idea of the classical art of Kamangars of Kutch.”

Based on the above reference one could state that the Kamangar communities must have profusely contributed to the fresco paintings of this region. But the questions still remain: How did they learn this sophisticated art? The colour recipes? and most important how did these communities familiarize themselves with Hindu iconography? As a large number of works executed on walls were Vaishnava themes, which could have been more familiar only to a Hindu artist. More over for the above-framed gazetteer information, even Dr. Goswamy states his disagreement with the stylistic attributions. ‘He disagrees with the information that Rajput and Mughal styles are visible in the mural tradition, a style which rather appears folk-like.’ Here there seems to be a mix-up in the information. This adaptation of information in the history of the Kutch Gazetteer perhaps appears following the findings by Ramsingh Rathod, a scholar on folkart and culture. His publication contribution in Gujarati - ‘Kutch-nu Sanskriti Darshan’ (1959) are widely read book, which must have influenced the Gazetteer editors. Hence to come to a convincing conclusion, it would be ideal to re-read the artistic attributions based on the quality of draftsmanship of the artist for the present study.

## **Speculations- Based on the Quality of Draftsmanship of the Artist**

The first painting ascribed to this court belongs to Maharaja Rao Desal I's reign. These large-size Royal portraits and Darbar scenes produced during his time are some of the most sophisticated works allied to this land. A quality that remained consistent till Rao Lakhpat's reign. As mentioned in the previous chapter, even the thematic compositions were popular themes familiar to a Mughal and Rajput courts painter. All qualities of a good portrait- flawless elegant lines, the delicacy of touch, the defined facial contours, and modeling alongside tonal gradations are visible on these portraits. Even for an extraordinary Kamangar artist to be gifted with such refined skills, and to believe that he could have learned by observing the activities in the Mughal court in Delhi seems unrealistic. Infact all points direct to the possibility that a master artist was probably invited to Kutch from outside. Comprehending that Rao Desal I and Rao Lakhpat by the second quarter of the eighteenth century had established a political and matrimonial connection with the court of Jodhpur, it is quite likely that an artist from Jodhpur or Nagaur must have visited Kutch to make Raos portraits in his initial phase.

Taking a step further, there is also a high possibility that a master artist (Dalchand) or his disciple from Jodhpur, could have been invited to Kutch to train the native artist. This assumption is not based on any historical facts or signatures but merely based on a broad possibility. Dalchand was a trained court artist by his father, painter Bhavanidas, who was trained at the Lahore court of Prince Muhammad Mu'azzam, and later moved to Delhi to work under Emperor Bahadur Shah I. Around 1724, he moved to Jodhpur court to work for Maharaja Abhai Singh and later to Kishangarh around 1728. As commented by Terence McNerney<sup>52</sup>, 'Dalchand was one of the leading Mughal court painters who were active from c.1710-1760. He was particularly gifted as a portrait painter and as an inventor of new compositions for group portraits and depictions of court events. Dalchand's portraits are remarkable for their psychological insights, and for the way they suggest the underlying character of the subject portrayed. As Dalchand spent most of his career in Rajasthan (initially at Jodhpur and later at Kishangarh, his oeuvre shows the way that the Mughal high

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<sup>52</sup> McNerney Terence, *Dalchand*, Editors-Beach C Milo, Fisher Eberhard and Goswamy B.N, Masters of Indian Painting 1100-1650, Niyogi books, 2015, Pp 563.

style and interest in observable facts spread from the imperial court to those outlying areas of the empire where an interest in painting also flourished.’

This particular interest in attributing the works to artist Dalchand or his disciples is based on three reasons. Primarily, the quality of portraiture itself- the imperial large-size portrait composition and darbar paintings, the elegant facial contours, controlled lines, the delicacy of touch, and the knowledge of traditional colours recipes all point to the fact that the artist was a trained professional who work for Kutch court. In the early portraiture, we also see a lot of similarities in the colours used in Jodhpur and Nagaur schools, especially the use of Mughal green background which is common to Jodhpur and Kutch. There is also a possibility that the Mughal group portrait hung on the walls of Aaina Mehal, depicting the ‘Succession group of Mughal Emperors’ was gifted by the artist himself as a prototype to design a Kutch version. Secondly, this was the time when the Kutch court was inviting masters from outside to train and encourage the native artist, with the vision to popularize Kutch as a centre for Braj bhasha learning and fine arts. Bhattaraka, Kanaka Khushalji who head the institute at the court of Bhuj was a scholar par excellent from Kishangarh region. He could have had some influence. The court also patronized Ramsingh Malam who was looking after the production of the art of enameling, tiles, and glass, who was also sent to Europe twice to perfect his learnings to set up factories in Kutch. This indicates that Rao was keen on hiring the best men in his court. It does not seem impossible to invite an established artist to the court of Bhuj. Thirdly, Maharaja Abhai Singh of Jodhpur was appointed as a Subahdar of Gujarat from 1730 to 1738 and stayed in Gujarat till 1733. Kutch during this period extended matrimonial alliance with Ramsingh, son of Maharaja Abhay Singh. And by this time artist Dalchand had already offered his services in the court of Abhay Singh at Jodhpur and moved to Kishangarh for better living. But studies by Faiyaz Ali Khan states that Dalchand would have remained an employee of the Kishangarh atelier until 1742, when the information from the *bahi* record ceases.<sup>53</sup> Because of the proximity in time and connection it does not seem impossible to address if he offered his services to Kutch or stayed for a brief period or occasionally visited Kutch, till 1760, to train the native artist.

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* Pp. 566

Probably this was also an opportunity when the Kamangars or native artists, got to learn the art of miniature painting from a Master. We have already noted that Rao Lakhpatt who was an institute builder and hence must have taken this opportunity to train some of the native artists with the requisite knowledge. Kamangars who were already on service at the court and inclined to learn must have grabbed this opportunity to train themselves along with a few others. Hence it is a largely assumed, but thoughtfully put statement that Kamangars learned the technique to paint from a Jodhpur Master.

Stylistically speaking, it is only from Rao Godh's reign that we start seeing works of a native artist in the Kutch court cultures. Rao Godh's portraits are largely available of two kinds: one which is imperial in quality, and the other, which has resembling qualities but not superior enough. They are small in size, and the colours are toned down to pastel shades. Here the finer details of an imperial style are lost. This could be because by then the local artist must have started working at the court giving their best efforts. A further stylistic departure is seen during Rao Raydhan's period, but understanding Rao's religious preferences, which was Islam, it is obvious he encouraged an artist who followed an Islam faith. But definitely, the preference for Durbar subjects and the imperial quality was compromised over the development of a regional style.

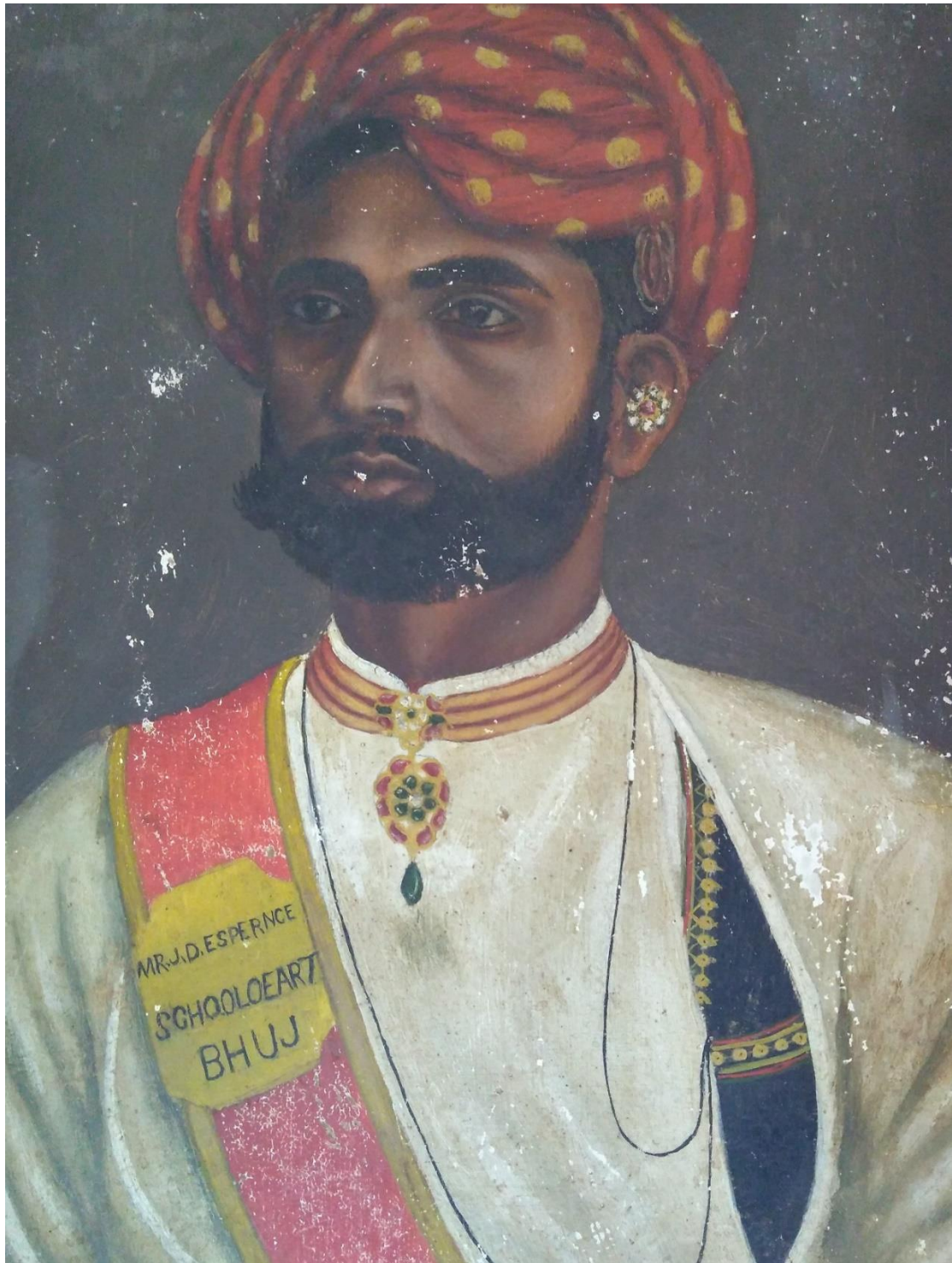
This phase from 1760-1820, based on the stylistic references it could be stated that the artist was experimenting with his understanding of painting. To begin with, they make copies of European prints, then slowly moves to document their surroundings. In no time they realize they could collage Indian religious narratives and merge them with their understanding of landscapes. Ramayana set as a fine example where we see both elements. And then independent documentation like the illustrated Avatar-gita Grandh. Interestingly, what the artist continues to retain with him are minor details like the royal turban style, the royal procession view, the three-quarter *jama*, and the bare blue sky. For all the Vaishnav paintings and manuscripts, it is hard to believe that a Kamangar could have contributed. Hence it has to be an artist wellversed in the Hindu narratives that they need no instruction to compose the illustration.

Similarly, around the 1800's when the Merchant families took interest in painting their residences, Kutch painters must have immediately acquainted themselves with the traditional knowledge of fresco paintings, including the preparation of gum-arabic on wet

surfaces, and the application of pigments on these surfaces, every process of fresco painting was picked up by the Kutch artist. Here it may be observed that although popular Hindu subjects were painted on the wall of these residences, one cannot ignore the strong element of design embellishing the spaces. Very often we see the tree-of-life design, geometric patterns, textile motifs, and also Buraq and angel figures. Hence, we may assume that a large number of Kamangars could have contributed to the mural tradition.

Once again around the 1830s, a workshop seems to have been held for the artist by Rao Desai III. This time a large number of native artists underwent training on new mediums and techniques. Our larger guess is that Marrieanne Postan must have trained and introduced these artists, the skill to study a model and draw what the British saw as picturesque. It appears unlike what Marianne Postan had in mind regarding Kutch artists, they were open to adapting to new instructions. Similarly, even when ornithologist Dr. Henry Pittman visited Kutch, the native artist seems to have no hesitation to study a new model. There was a sheer confidence that they exhibited through their works. Be it to work on Indian paper or an imported one, watercolour or gouache, the artist blissfully painted as if they loved to document their surroundings. Some had a sensitive hand that they could imitate the English like the ethnographic study by Marianne Postan. And another painter used strong Indian colours to sketch their models. Based on inscribed details at the bottom of the page, we do gather that these paintings were sold to the buyers at the cost of Rupees 1 per folio. Which was indeed an alluring return for a skilled native painter.

In the later part of the nineteenth century, we may assume that two factors affected the life of the artist: 1) the increased use of cameras, these paintings started losing their importance as ethnographic documentation was now available with ease. 2) During this period a large number of people migrated out of Kutch for greater opportunity. It must be around this period when the Rao's started supporting the artist by sponsoring a large number of scroll paintings that illustrated the local procession scenes. The artist who continued to reside put in the best of their knowledge. Their small ethnographic study became detailed long scroll paintings that demonstrate the moving processions. The name of the artist scribed on the scroll, Vadalal Md Jumma ... (illegible) and Jumma Ibrahim (Khengarji Sawari indicates that he is an artist following Islam religion.



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