



The Birla Razmnama

The three-volume *Razmnama* manuscript in the Birla Academy of Art & Culture, Kolkata, first surfaced around 1925 when Professor M. Abdullah Chaghatai of Lahore wrote about 'a manuscript in three volumes including 84 full-page miniatures by the court artists of Akbar' in the *Oriental College Magazine*, Lahore.¹ Nine years later, in his article, 'A Few Hindu Miniature Painters of the 18th and 19th Centuries', published in *Islamic Culture* (Vol. VIII, No. 3, 1934, pp. 393-412) he again referred to this manuscript: 'It (A hitherto unpublished and signed work of Mir Sayyid Ali Tabrizi, *Judai*) is from a manuscript in three volumes of 18 x 10 inches including 84 full-size miniatures by the court artists of Akbar. Its scribe is Pir Muhammad bin Muhammad Hafiz and it is dated 1014 AH, the year of Akbar's death.' The article is illustrated with a miniature from the manuscript (Plate 27).

Almost ten years later, Professor Chaghatai provides more detail on the manuscript in an article published in the *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute*, 1943-44. In 'The Illustrated Edition of the *Razm Nama*' he describes how he saw the manuscript 'some years back' with a Simla dealer who allowed him to examine it.² He says he saw 84 illustrations, though we now find only 81 miniatures bound with the volumes. The present order of the paintings appears to be correct and it is difficult to account for the extra three illustrations he records. The article does not furnish much information about the manuscript besides giving the basic information on the number of folios, illustrations and the details of the colophon found at the end of the first volume on folio 259v (Plate 82). He reproduces five paintings from the book but their references in the article are unclear. Despite these shortcomings Chaghatai remained our only source of information on this manuscript for the next 43 years until Karl Khandalavala published his long note on it in the book, *A Collector's Dream*.³

Soon after the publication of Chaghatai's article the manuscript changed hands and came into the possession of the well-known Delhi jeweller Gulabchand Godha. Among others Khandalavala examined it and recommended that the State Museum, Lucknow, buy it. But Godha wanted Rs. 80,000 for the manuscript, a figure the Museum could not afford, and they lost the opportunity to acquire a complete Akbari period illustrated *Razmnama* manuscript. But Lucknow's loss was a gain for the distinguished connoisseurs and collectors, B. K. Birla and Sarala Devi Birla, who acquired it for the Birla Academy of Art & Culture at Kolkata – the institute they had founded a few years earlier to which they bequeathed hundreds of sculptures, paintings, minor art objects and coins. But the manuscript remained virtually unknown and failed to draw scholarly attention as it was rarely exhibited for the general viewer. Jerry Losty echoed public disappointment when he wrote in *The Art of the Book in India* that 'the manuscript has vanished'.⁴ The Birlas, however, were very keen to publish it and invited the noted art historian Professor Pramod Chandra to prepare a catalogue of miniatures in its holding including the miniatures of the *Razmnama*. He examined the collection

and with the help of a Persian scholar correctly identified most of the *Razmnama* paintings and prepared a brief hand list. Chandra's project, unfortunately, was never published.⁵

The Birla *Razmnama* is bound in three volumes. The first volume contains folios 1 to 259 and is made up of the *Adi*, *Sabha*, *Vana*, *Virata*, *Udyoga* and *Bhisma parvas* and 41 illustrations. The second volume has folios 260 to 512 including the *Drona*, *Karna*, *Salya*, *Sauptika*, *Stri* and *Santi parvas* and 25 illustrations. The third volume contains folios 513 to 629 and has the *Anusasana*, *Asvamedhika*, *Asramavasika*, *Mausala*, *Mahaprasthanana* and *Svargarohana parvas* and only 15 illustrations.

The folios are 40.7 x 27.3 cm and have all been remargined twice at different dates. The first volume opens with a circular *shamsa* or sunburst design in gold, blue and red (see page 20). A late *shikasta* inscription below it reads, 'Mahabharata in 3 volumes, this is the first volume'. On its reverse is an *unwan* of modest quality in green, gold, blue and red (see page 21). The script is in fine Nastaliq, with headings in red. The text panel usually contains 31 lines. The colophon at the end of the first volume on folio 259v reads, '*Bhisma parva*, which consists of 6884 *slokas*, 113 *adhyayas* is finished here, poor beggar Pir Muhammad *katib*, son of Muhammad Hafiz (wrote this), 4 safar, sanah 1014 (June 21, 1605)' (Plate 82). There is no such colophon at the end of the other two volumes and there is no indication of the patron who commissioned the work.

The size of the Birla *Razmnama* conforms to the size of Akbar's personal copies of the *Razmnama* (40.8 x 23.5 cm) and *Ramayana* (41.2 x 27.7 cm), both preserved in the Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum in near-pristine condition. The recently discovered *Ramayana* manuscript was evidently in the possession of Akbar's mother Hamida Banu and is also in the same 39 x 26.5 cm format. It has 929 folios and 18 lines of text within a framed 23.7 x 13.8 cm area.⁶

The comparison ends there as the Birla *Razmnama* has only 81 illustrations – less than half the 168 images in the imperial copy – and the subjects also vary widely. The first nine paintings of the Birla manuscript do not have any counterpart in the Jaipur copy. Some stories like the burning of the *jatugriha* or house of lac and the subsequent killing of the *rakshasa* Hidimba – illustrated in two separate miniatures (AG 1688 and 1689) – are condensed into one in the Birla copy (Plate 10). The *Ramayana* story in the Jaipur *Razmnama* – narrated in as many as 12 miniatures (from AG 1707 to 1718) – is compressed into one (Plate 29) the Birla *Razmnama* copy and leave out many details. The Nala-Damayanti story, on the other hand, illustrated in four separate images in the 1598-99 copy⁷ and in two images in this one (Plates 18 and 19) is compressed into one image in the Jaipur copy (AG 1698). Many other stories like the killing of Ghatotkacha (Plate 47), Bhima's mace-fight with Duryodhana (Plate 53), Asvathama's ruthless killing of the Pandava children (Plate 54) and Arjuna's encounter with Babhravahana (Plate 75) – that are elaborately shown in two or three images in the Jaipur version or the 1598-99 copy – are shown in a single image in the Birla copy.

Several stories not chosen in other *Razmnama* manuscripts interested the painters of the Birla *Razmnama* and are depicted in well-drawn images: Duryodhana's *ghosha yatra*, the journey he undertook to humiliate the Pandavas but ended up being humiliated by the Gandharvas (Plates 26, 27); Krishna's exhibition of his supernatural form and prowess in the Kaurava court (Plate 36) or on the battlefield of Kurukshetra before the exposition of the *Bhagavata Gita* (Plate 38) have no parallel in the Jaipur copy or in the dispersed 1598-99 copy. There are a number of such examples. In the *Santi parva* and the *Anusasana parva*, the Birla *Razmnama* has 19 images as against 13 images in the Jaipur copy but there are as many as 49 images in the 1598-99 version. The exploits with the sacrificial horse – related in the *Asvamedhika parva* – are shown in 47 illustrations in the Jaipur copy, 22 in the 1598-99 copy against only four in the Birla copy.

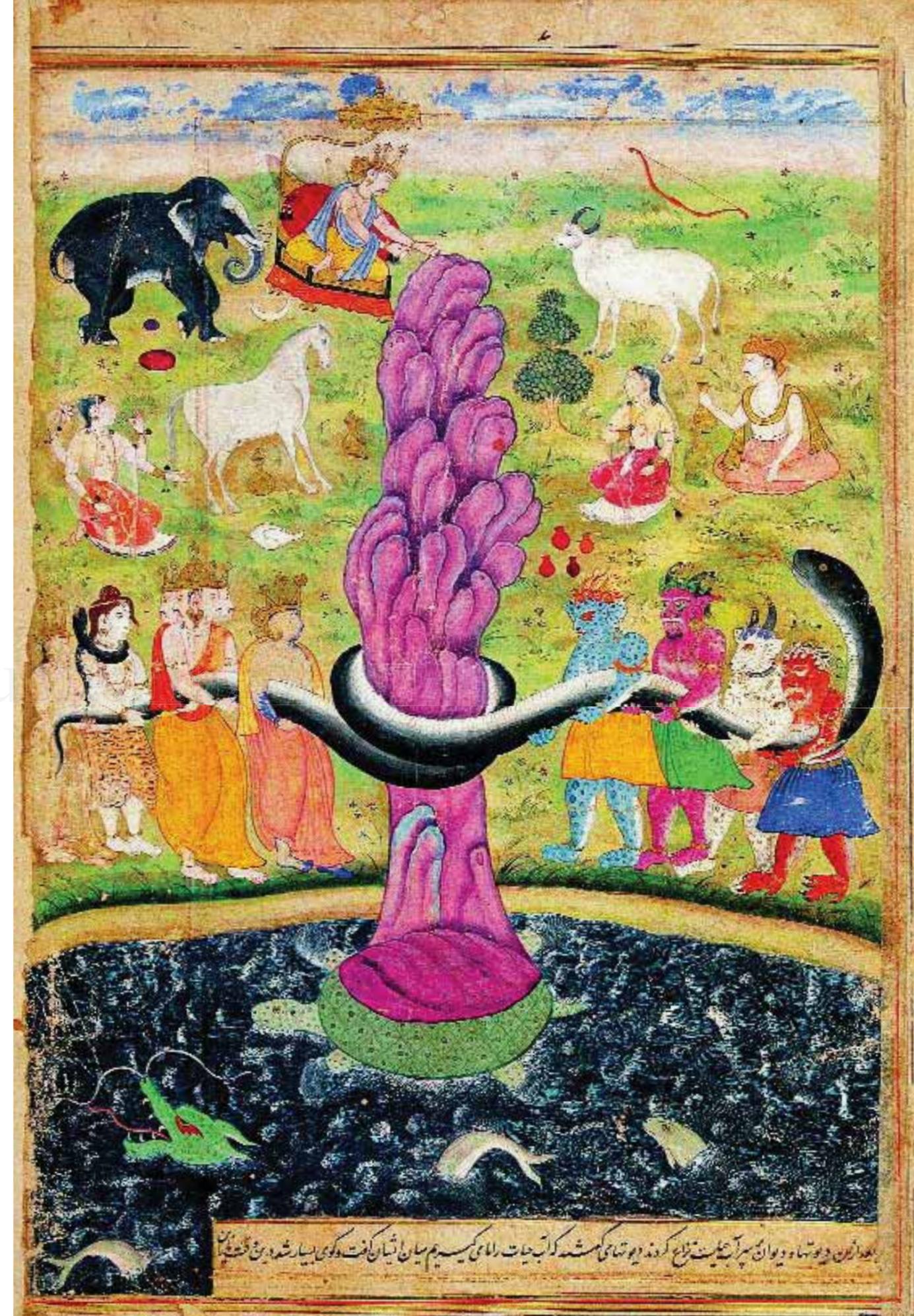
This clearly establishes that the makers of the Birla copy did not have any information about the Akbari manuscript and the illustrations were planned without referring to any previous miniature cycles. The stories chosen and conceptualized were those familiar to the patron and they were rendered very successfully as many of the miniatures are easily

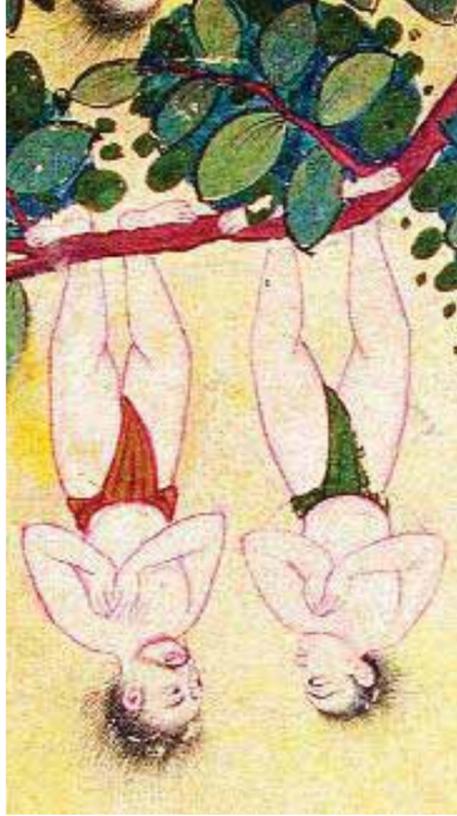
2 *Samudra-manthana*: *Devas* and *asuras* churn the ocean
 Folio 7r, 33 x 22.5 cm
 Reproduced: Khandalavala 1987, fig. 6.1; Das 2004, fig. 1

When a conclave of gods gather on the peak of Mount Sumeru to discuss how to obtain *amrita*, the nectar of immortality, Narayana and Brahma advise them to assemble on the shores of the Great Ocean, which is made of milk. There the *devas* and *asuras* uproot the snow-clad mountain Mandara and place it on the back of Kurmaraja, the tortoise king, in the middle of the ocean. Then, they coil the serpent king Vasuki's enormous length around the mountain. On one shore the *asuras* hold his tail and on the other the *devas* hold his neck. They pull in turn, so the mountain spins one way and then another, churning the ocean. From the churned waters emerge the moon; the goddesses Lakshmi and Suradevi; the white horse of the sun, Uchhaisrava; the gem Kaustubha; the conch Panchajanya; the wishing-tree of fragrance, the *parijata*; Surabhi, the wish-fulfilling sacred cow; and Indra's four-tusked elephant, Airavata. Then the physician Dhanvantari *deva* comes out bearing a cup full of *amrita*, the essence of life. Suddenly the waters of the ocean, which have been churned for too long, turn dark and Vasuki begins spewing fire-like poison.

This painting completely lacks the drama and fury of the original story. The ocean is depicted like a large pool and the *devas* and *asuras*, who are portrayed like puppets, seem to hold the serpent rope far too casually. The four-tusked white elephant is painted black here. The subject is illustrated in the 1598–99 *Razmnama*¹ but not in the imperial copy at Jaipur, though there is a remarkable painting in the imperial copy of the *Ramayana* painted by Ramdas.² The former does not show the precise details given here and the latter shows only the beginning of the exercise.

1. Kramrisch 1986, fig. 15. Listed, Seyller 1985, no. 3.
 2. No. AG 1869; Das 2004, fig. 2.





3 Garuda flying with the fighting elephant and tortoise
Folio 8v, 33.8 x 21.7 cm
Reproduced: Khandalavala 1987, fig. 62

As Garuda, Vishnu's eagle, is flying in search of *amrita* to free his mother Vinata from a curse he is assailed by hunger. His father *maharshi* Kasyapa comes to his rescue and tells him to go to the lake and eat the enormous elephant and giant tortoise who have been engaged in a deadly combat for years. These giant animals are actually two acerbic *rishi* brothers – Vibhvasu and Supratika – who have been transformed after a curse.

Garuda lifts both giants but is unable to find a comfortable place to sit and enjoy eating them. A huge *vata* or banyan tree in a distant land offers him a place on its branches, but it gives way as soon as Garuda lands on it with his prey. As the branch is about to crack Garuda notices that a group of small Balakhilya *munis*, absorbed in their penance, are hanging upside down from the branch. These monks are known for hurling curses when they are disturbed and, anxious not to incur their wrath, Garuda decides to continue flying with the branch in his beak. His father placates the *munis* and Garuda is able to enjoy his meal on the peak of a deserted snow-clad mountain.

This superb illustration shows Garuda flying with the giant elephant and tortoise in his claws. In his beak he holds the branch of the *vata* tree with the thumbnail-shaped Balakhilya *munis* hanging from it. Though the giant tree is shown with schematically arranged foliage the elephant has been drawn with utmost care. The figure of Garuda – with his large wings – is perfectly balanced in the composition. The great lake, home of the giant tortoise and elephant, occupies the entire foreground like a big lotus pool with paved banks.

