



Painting Modernity, Signalling Status: Marwari Frescos of Churu

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Abstract

The paper argues that wall frescos of the *havelis* or large residential mansions in the towns of Shekhawati region of Rajasthan, India, are not merely decorative pictures. On the other hand, the paper proposes that these frescos are an important source of understanding the manners in which colonial modernity of the Raj was expressed in cultural productions of the Marwaris, a merchant diaspora, which largely originated in the late-nineteenth century in Rajputana, and took modern colonial presidencies of Calcutta and Bombay as their primary adoptive homelands. In deference to the scope and limitation of a paper, the discussion is confined to the frescos of Malji Ka Kamra, a haveli now serving as a heritage hotel in Churu, which was built by the Kothari clan in the early twentieth century. The paper presents a selection of representative frescos from the haveli, and employs the literary method of close reading to tease out meanings, which then help generate an understanding of the ways in which the Marwaris deployed haveli construction and painting as a means to signal social status as well as perform diasporicity at home.

Keywords: Marwari, Shekhawati, Diaspora, Haveli, Frescos.

Introduction

In the second half of the nineteenth century colonial India, a large number of persons who identified as members of the *bania* jati or the Hindu merchant class migrated from the princely states of Bikaner, Sikar and Jhunjhunu, collectively understood as Shekhawati, in northern Indian to the modern colonial presidencies of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras (Timber 1978). In their adoptive homelands, these migrants came to be known as Marwaris. Like the experience of several diasporic communities elsewhere in the world, the Marwari experience also exhibited conditions such as nostalgia and longing for

'home', a sense of being in exile, and characteristics such as telling each other stories of home and migration, preserving the memory of home in art and culture through food, music and dress, regular and ritualistic visits to home, and the like.

The evolution of a social and cultural Marwari identity emerged as much as a function of nostalgia for and memory of *des* (home), as it related to a public performance of culture. While the former implied an inward looking process that was geared towards the construction of a self-identity, the latter was meant for an outward projection of the same self (Hardgrove 2004). While the achievement of the former was predicated on reproducing in exile the remembered culture of *des*, the latter was enacted through the organisation of religious and community festivals such as *gangaur*, *teej*, *satipuja*, and the like, in the public space. These processes together went into the construction of a consciousness of dislocation and exile, and that of being in diaspora.

One of the most important ways of performing this identity was the construction of mansions or havelis, also called *heli* in Marwari, by these merchants in their villages of origin. These havelis served more than as mere dwellings. In *des*, they became symbolic of the merchants' entrepreneurial success in *disawar*, the land of exile. In *disawar*, making known among the wider community that a merchant has had a haveli successfully constructed and inhabited in *des* served to signal that the said merchant has not given up his roots, and he could thus continue to claim his membership, belonging and status in the community. The havelis thus became ways of acquiring what the French Marxist sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has identified, although in a different context, as social and cultural capital. In other words, the havelis served to produce and perform status, the currency of a precolonial social organisation. It is these havelis that form the locus of the present project. A significant differentiator of Shekhawati havelis from other haveli cultures in the Indian subcontinent is the presence of elaborate fresco paintings on the walls of these havelis, which found its high point during the period of 1860s to 1920s. This timeline is

similar to the timeline of the migration of Shekhawati banias to the presidencies. The contention, then, of this paper is that the frescos found on the walls of merchant havelis from this period are a record of the Marwari interaction with colonial modernity and also a means of the memorialisation of that interaction. Within the limitation and scope offered by a single paper, the frescos on the walls of Malji Ka Kamra, a fairly well-known haveli of Churu shall be unpacked of their meanings.

Churu is located in the Shekhawati region in north-eastern Rajasthan, India, approximately 250 kilometres west-south-west of Delhi. Strictly speaking, Churu lay in the erstwhile princely state of Bikaner, adjacent to Shekhawati which comprised the states of Sikar and Jhunjhunu. However, the mercantile cultural productions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have rendered these territorial boundaries rather culturally insignificant, and the mercantile haveli and fresco culture found in Churu appears to have the same lineage as that in other towns of Shekhawati. Thus, even though technically Churu lay adjacent to and outside of Shekhawati, the word Shekhawati is used in this paper to denote the entire region culturally and not politically.

The method of this inquiry will be to exhibit select frescos from the haveli and then deploy the literary method of close reading to interpret the frescos. No fresco on the wall is accompanied by a caption, thus indicating that their purpose was less informative and more decorative. Therefore, captions had to be supplied by the present author, only, though, for the purpose of easy reference and identification, beyond which they do not serve any purpose.

The mansion was built by Mal Chand ji Kothari of the Kothari clan that ran the Hazarimall Sagarmall Banking and Commission Agents firm, with Churu in the Bikaner state and Calcutta in British India as their main operation centres, with presence in Mymensingh (now in Bangladesh) and Bilasi Pada (Assam) as well, and trading in British cloth, jute and grain. The family had been conferred with the symbols of royal honour such as *chhadi* or a royal cane, *chakraas* or a royal insignia and

rukka or royal letters (Bhandari et al., 1928). To the north of Malji Ka Kamra lie four Kothari havelis, namely, Madanchand ji Kothari haveli, Tolaram ji Kothari haveli, Hazarimallji Sagarmallji Kothari haveli, and Malchand ji Kothari haveli. The last appears to be the oldest, on account of its purported vintage of 1870 and built by Shobhachnad ji Kothari (Singh 58), as also the fact that of all the four Kothari havelis nestled in close proximity, this appears to be the most dilapidated and rundown, and remains completely inaccessible, under lock and without a caretaker. The entrances of the four havelis open into a private lane set off by imposing but presently rundown gates at both ends of the lane. The gate at the northern end of the lane carries the date Samvat 1977, equivalent to 1920, as its year of construction. It appears that the gates were installed after the construction of all the four havelis, as local folklore indicates and Virendra Singh (57) records that the biggest of all the four havelis – Tolaram ji Kothari haveli comprising two courtyards, four kitchens, and six *chandnis* (*al fresco* rooms) – was commissioned to generate employment for the local poor during the famed famine of 1899 or Samvat 1956, popularly known as the ‘Chappaniya kaal’¹, almost two decades prior to the erection of the gates. Malji Ka Kamra is located across a narrow public lane from the southern mouth of the Kothari private lane. Given that it was built as a pleasure house to host parties and celebratory events, and entertain important personages such as the Bikaner Maharaja Ganga Singh, it is remarkable that it is slightly set off from the main residential havelis of the Kothari clan. It is a three-storey structure, set back from the front courtyard, now manicured into a lawn, into which a visitor first enters upon crossing the otherwise unremarkable exterior boundary wall. From the lawns, a short flight of steps ascends to the main portico which is then punctuated by three sets of several round columns that end halfway in square lintels that then meet into a three-cusped arch. Each set of columns is in a grid formation, with all the three sets together supporting a first floor balcony. A room is set right behind the columns but opens indoors into the *bhitarchowk* (the inner courtyard) which is

accessed by narrow passages called *polis* going in from between the sets of the columns. Both the *polis* open into a veranda that runs along the entire length of the bhitarchowk on all the four sides. At the far end of the veranda from the mouth of the poli is a narrow staircase set in the thickness of the wall that leads to the second storey veranda which lies directly above the veranda on the first storey. Several rooms on the first storey are set back and accessed from the veranda, thus overlooking the bhitarchowk. The pattern of the first storey – of columns placed in a grid supporting a balcony on the storey above, a veranda that runs around the chowk and rooms set back from and overlooking the chowk – repeats on the second and the third storey.

Unlike other havelis in the town, this pleasure house haveli does not carry frescos on its outer walls. Instead, in what appears to be a modern innovation in the decade of its construction, that is, 1900-10s, the outermost row of columns in each set holds up shorter-than-lifesize human reliefs cut in stucco. These reliefs begin at the base of the square lintels and reach the roofline, with floral and decorative patterns in bas-relief filling up the space between human reliefs. The pattern is repeated on the columns of the first and second floor balconies. The human reliefs are a wide assortment of figurines ranging from uniformed English soldiers to the modern Indian woman wearing a sari in the Bengali fashion, that is, with the end of the sari thrown over the left shoulder, a blouse shirt, the head uncovered and carrying a modern purse (Picture 1), to a winged *apsara* or celestial nymph, flanked by cherubs drawn from the renaissance tradition, sharing space with *yakshas* drawn from the puranic temple tradition.



Picture 1: A front view of Malji Ka Kamra

All this put together, especially the sets of columns upholding balconies on the storeys above, lend the haveli what has been described as “wedding cake architecture” (Cooper 55). While the frescos in the interior rooms place the haveli firmly in the Shekhawati haveli fresco tradition, the eschewing of frescos on the outer walls in favour of relief structures as well as an open *baithak* (sitting room) in the form a front portico lend the haveli an element of modernity, in the sense that relief structures on walls, although a very old architectural feature in themselves, had so far remained confined to forts and royal palaces, and perhaps it is the first time that such embellishments appeared on a merchant haveli. At the minimum, this appears to be the case in Churu, for no other haveli in the town sports such reliefs. Moreover, a return of the western gaze in the form of tourism and lately some scholarly interest has led to a distinct self-perception on part of the haveli owners as the haveli being part of the larger subcontinental history enmeshed in its encounters with Mughal and colonial rule. This is attested to by a plaque like board displayed prominently in one of the *polis* (see Picture 2).



Picture 2: A timeline of Malji Ka Kamra

The board shows two timelines, one of which begins with Churu being a commercial trading hub in the sixteenth century and ends with declaring that leading Indian technology start-ups of the twenty-first century are owned by Marwaris; with collapse of Mughal authority, rise of British colonialism, and the concomitant migration of Marwaris out of Shekhawati, expanded on between the two extremes. Parallel to this timeline of the larger Marwari history, the other timeline on the board lists temporal signposts in the history of the haveli itself, with 1905-20 being listed as the years of its construction, its post-Independence use of housing government offices, its subsequent state of disuse, disrepair and abandonment, the restoration between 2005-2012 and its inauguration as a heritage hotel in 2013. While the self-perception of the haveli's place in modern subcontinental history may be attributed to recent tourist and scholarly interest in Shekhawati, it may be proposed that the haveli's builders too must have had a sense of their location at the intersection of tradition and colonial modernity, as evidenced by elements of the latter in the frescos painted on the walls and ceilings of the inner rooms. Set apart from the other main residential Kothari havelis, the imposing wedding cake

architecture on the exterior unlike any seen in the region and frescos only on the interior walls along with the haveli's role as a pleasure and party house that was used to host prominent personages of the political class of the age must have been deployed to produce and perform status and merchant share in political sovereignty.

A close reading of the frescos on the inner walls of the rooms in Malji Ka Kamra demands attention in terms of their stylistics as well as thematic concerns. However, given that the primary concern of the paper is to study these frescos in terms of their relevance to memorialising Marwari interaction with colonial modernity, the reading of these frescos will remain focussed majorly on their subject matter, and reference the stylistics only in passing as and when necessary. Categorised by subject matter, the frescos at Malji Ka Kamra, as indeed in all of Churu and by extension in all of Shekhawati, can be put under two heads: 'tradition frescos' and 'modernity frescos'. At first glance, the frescos at Malji Ka Kamra that can be called the former include 'Sita and Hanumana in Ashok Vatika' (Picture 3), 'Kaliya mardan' (Picture 4), female mendicants (Picture 5a and 5b), 'Shankar-Gauri on a moonswing' (Picture 6) and Radha-Krishna (Picture 7). The frescos in the latter category would be those of Italian gardens with pavilions and fountains (Pictures 8a and 8b), and canals and lakes with steamships and sailboats, respectively (Pictures 9a and 9b).

On the surface, the categorisation seems neat as the subject matter in the former set can be said to be Indian in its thematic and that in the latter set can be called European. Yet, a closer examination of all these would reveal that almost every single one of these frescos carries traditional as well as modern elements. For instance, while all these frescos are inscribed within square or rectangular panels, the inner golden borders and floral or solid outlines of which derive from the Amer tradition of royal portraits (Glynn, 2000), the naturalism and perspective of all of these are surely influenced by the developments in visual arts in European Renaissance.

In the ‘Sita and Hanumana in Ashok Vatika’ fresco, Sita is shown sitting on a swing. The ropes of the swing do not fall vertical but are painted at an angle to the vertical, thus suggesting movement, which further suggests frolic and pleasure instead of being pensive as she is described in the said situation in *The Ramayana*.



Picture 3. Hanumana and Sita in Ashok Vatika

In contrast to the popular image of Sita in Ashok Vatika wherein she is divested of all adornments, this fresco shows her wearing several items of jewellery. Also, the end of her sari is thrown over the left shoulder in the Bengali fashion, along with a blouse the arms of which are just short of her elbows. Further, the ground of the Vatika as seen in the fresco is paved with what appear to be rectangular marble tiles, receding into the far end which is lined with Ashok (*Saraca asoca*) trees in perspective.

The entire Vatika is on a raised plinth which is to be accessed by a flight of three steps, both sides of which are enclosed by low solid balustrades, the ends of which are topped by flower pots in the Italian style. Overall, the fresco appears deceptively simple in its subject matter and may appear mundane and traditional to a twenty-first century observer. Yet, in the first decade of the twentieth century in remote Rajputana, this fresco clearly shows signs of European modernity that reached Rajputana via Bengal, and carried with itself elements of Bengali modernity, which itself had been a function of colonial European modernity.



Picture 4: Kaliya Mardan

On the other hand, the only element of modernity in 'Kaliya Mardan' (Picture 4) is the placement of child Krishna in a water body that can only be inferred as an artificial pool and not the Yamuna river as it is depicted in the epic, because this water body is enclosed by a parapet on the far side, and the vegetation

beyond it seems to be that of a garden on account of the symmetry between the shrubbery on the left and that on the right. The two female mendicant frescos and the Radha-Krishna fresco (Picture 7) are similarly set in paved gardens. Of the two mendicants, while one (Picture 5a) has her sari going over the right shoulder in the northern and western Indian fashion, the other (Picture 5b) wears it in the Bengali manner, as is the case with Gauri in the Shankar-Gauri (Picture 6) fresco.



Picture 5a: Female mendicant 1



Picture 5b: Female mendicant 2

The female mendicant frescos are devoid of any mythological context in this representation, and stylistically they seem to follow what came to be known as the Company School. Thus, while stylistically these frescos may lean towards the category of modernity frescos, their subject matter places them in the other category, thus underlining the hybrid nature of these frescos. The Shankar-Gauri fresco (Picture 6) has Shankar and Gauri holding hands with each other, suggesting conjugal intimacy which has been otherwise a rare or an absent element in pictorial or sculptural depictions of figures from the Shaiva pantheon. The intimacy conventionally depicted in the Shaiva tradition has mostly been familial rather than conjugal. The suggestion of conjugal intimacy in this fresco gestures a shift away from traditional depictions and towards modern ones.



Picture 6: Shankar-Gauri on a moonswing

A brief digression on the sari modernity would be appropriate here before the discussion proceeds to other frescos at Malji Ka Kamra. The modern Bengali style of the sari referred to above is known as the ‘nivi’ drape. ‘Nivi’ appears to be a cognate of the Sanskrit ‘nava’, meaning new, thus clearly establishing this as a new kind of drape of the ancient sari as opposed to the traditional drape. It is reported by Banerjee and Miller (2003) and Kaamyia Sharma (2019) that the nivi drape was an improvisation devised by Jnanadanandini Devi, wife of Satyanendra Nath Tagore and sister-in-law to Rabindranath Tagore (Sharma 230). She improvised on the Parsi drape of the sari – with a tailored blouse, petticoat and the *pallu* end over one shoulder – by throwing the pallu over the left instead of the right shoulder as in the Parsi drape, and sought to popularise this style through *Bamabodhini Patrika* (Sharma 231). In this sense, in the early twentieth century, the appearance of the nivi drape on the walls of a Churu haveli where it is worn by Sita set in Ashok

Vatika laid out like an Italian garden signifies the reach of an amalgamated modernity where the gaze is fixed outward from Churu through Calcutta and onward to Europe. That the reach of such amalgamated modernity to Churu was a function of Marwari diasporic adventurism coupled with the traditional imperative of producing status signals an important signpost in the memorialisation of Marwari insertion into modernity.



Picture 7: Radha-Krishna

Among the other frescos at Malji Ka Kamra that suggest European influence are those of Italian gardens (Picture 8a and 8b), harbours (Picture 9a) and lakes (9b).



Picture 8a: Italian garden 1

While 8a shows a manicured garden path with a mounted statue in its middle and raised pavilions and gates on either sides of the path all in the Italian fashion (Lazzaro, 1990), 8b shows a riverside garden with high pavilions on either side of the path leading to the river in the distance, with spires of a cathedral rising high behind the pavilion on the left.



Picture 8b: Italian garden 2

The harbour fresco shows a steamship entering a harbour through an inlet in a river with an empty right bank and pavilions on the left bank of the river.



Picture 9a: Canal with steamship

While the architectural style of pavilions in this fresco is difficult to determine, the presence of a steamship clearly hints at modernity. What hints at modern European influence more than the steamship, though, is the obvious artistic lineage to which this fresco gestures, that is, the harbour works of French renaissance master Claude Lorraine, particularly his 1639 work ‘Seaport at Sunset’ (Picture 9aa).



Picture 9aa: Claude Lorraine’s ‘Seaport at Sunset’

Source:<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d1/Sea-Port-at-Sunset-1639-xx-Claude-Lorraine.JPG>

Similarly, 9b bears an influence of Lorraine’s another 1639 work ‘An Artist Studying from Nature’ (Picture 9bb).



Picture 9b: Lake with sailboat



Picture 9bb: Claude Lorraine's 'An Artist Studying from Nature'

Source:https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Claude_Lorraine_-_An_Artist_Studying_from_Nature_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

With a lake surrounded by snow-capped mountains and a small sailboat floating on the lake, the landscape in 9b is unlike any found in the entire Rajputana region. Similarly, the coconut palms that are seen in these frescos are found neither in Rajputana nor in Italy, whose gardens these representations seek to imitate, but are found abundantly in the Bengal region from where the Shekhawati banias took their modernity. It is necessarily a depiction of a foreign land, the knowledge of which could only be gained through travel and migration, thus

making it a function of diaspora and in this case European modernity. In the Marwari imagination, then, Bengal – and much that was natural and traditional to Bengal – could be construed as modern to Shekhawati. The strokes in any of these frescos are, of course, not as fine or measured as in renaissance or later European art, nor do they live up to the measures of the famed golden ratio, thus rendering these frescos poor imitations of their likely inspirations. Thus, although seemingly poised to tip over into the bathetic, this temporally and spatially displaced mimetic performance of mimesis from renaissance classicism manages to sustain and circumscribe itself as a symbol of that colonial encounter which produced a diaspora and served as a way of its memorialisation.

In sum, the frescos of Malji Ka Kamra, as those of other havelis in Churu and other towns in the region can be clearly read as instances of expression of a tentative Marwari modernity, which resulted from the Marwari's migration into a diaspora. Thus, Marwari cultural productions of the late nineteenth century may provide fertile grounds even for a reimagination of diaspora theories, in light of the fact that the originary as well as the adoptive homelands of this diaspora found themselves under the same nation-state as Independence dawned in the Indian subcontinent. The Marwari production and signalling of status found expression in haveli construction and fresco painting. The Marwari expression of modernity acquired in diaspora was articulated at home, thereby indicating the arrival of modernity at home via diaspora. In other words, this was another instance of the famed universalisation of capital being a precondition for modernity.

End Notes:

1. See, Alka Saraogi's Hindi novel *Kalikatha: via Bypass* (1998) for an understanding of the chhapaniya's place in Marwari imagination and memory.

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