

Decodification of a Chughtai Mudra

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The silent but didactic imagery of Indian art is invested with meaning that served to propagate its religious ideals. The images of Buddhist Deities are highly idealized, with stylized stances and hand gestures or '*mudras*', which are of specific mystical significance. Given the familiarity of the symbolism and hand gestures, Buddhist art has been fully understood, hence better appreciated. These *mudras* are a salient feature of Hindu art and dance, as well. When A.R. Chughtai, a South Asian Artist, of the 20th century, chose to establish his native identity with the East, he too employed some of these *mudras* in his art. He also created new symbols and visual-metaphors to translate new themes and concepts for his paintings. This paper decodes a Chughtai *mudra*, that forms the focal point of his illustration, The Slave Girl, (Fig.1).

Dr. Coomraswamy was the first to unfold to the world the narrative mysteries of Indian art, consequently evoking interest and understanding for it. E.B. Havell expresses that, "Indian art is essentially mystical, symbolic and transcendental. The artist is both poet and priest"¹. It is important to note that Indian art was not conceived for the

sake of art, but for the purpose of worship. It aims to embody abstract, intellectual, metaphysical and transcendental qualities, personifying the supernatural aspects of its Deities. Bhartha Iyer the author of Indian Art corroborates:

Gestures, postures and attributes are not only very characteristic features of Indian works of art but they are also significant conventions designed to convey specific meanings and enhance the content of a given form.

...The use of *mudra* as a definite sign language had come into existence long before the days of Buddha (6th Cen. B.C) ²

It is apparent that Chughtai was well aware of this aspect of Indian art, as he has painted many Hindu and Buddhist motifs. Other than painting religious and mundane subjects, Chughtai has also painted folklore and historical subjects and has illustrated Persian and Urdu poetry. He has conceived symbols to translate these into his art, drawing influence from varied sources including religion and literature. *Mudras* are a perfect example of religious symbols whereas, 'the moth and Lamp', is a visual-metaphor adapted from literature. To determine that the hand gesture of, The Slave Girl is a self-created symbol of Chughtai, it seems relevant that the cryptic *mudras* of Indian art must be recognized.

Bharatha analyses some of the basic *mudras* of Buddhist art that are impregnated with meaning. *Dhyana mudra*, (Fig.2), when Buddha is seated in a yogi position, the hands rest on

the lap, this is a gesture of contemplation. *Bhumi-sparsa mudra*, (Fig.3), the right hand of the seated Bhudda touching the earth, indicates His triumph over evil. *Dharma Chakra mudra*, (Fig.4), is a gesture of 'setting the wheel of law in motion'. *Abhaya mudra*, (Fig.5), this gesture means 'fear not', and is a sign of assurance and protection. *Varada mudra*, (Fig.10) is a promise of fulfillment of the wishes of the devotee. *Vitarka mudra*, (Fig.6) is a gesture of teaching. *Anjali mudra*, (Fig.7) is a Buddhist as well as Christian symbol of prayer. *Katakamukha mudra*, (Fig.8) is a gesture of a deity holding a lotus flower. *Ardha-chandra* and *Gaja Hasta*, (Fig.9), employed in the figure of dancing Siva. The hands resemble a half-moon or an elephant's trunk.³

Mudras are not only important features of Buddhist art they are also essentially employed in Hindu art and dance. With the growth of the cult of Hindu Deities, Indian dance became a highly developed form of art, which had a profound influence on its art and sculpture. The artist was supposed to possess the knowledge of dance, which manifested itself in the rhythmic flow characteristic of Indian art. The images of Hindu deities were developed with amazing complexity of form imbued with religious meaning. Brahma, Vishu and Siva, the principal Hindu deities were depicted with multi-limbs, symbolic of special qualities attributed to these Omni-potent dieties.

The four-armed images of Brahma (Fig.10) is a perfect example of this. In one hand Brahma holds a water pot, symbol of creation. In the other he holds the four Vedas, depicting wisdom, yet in the third hand he holds a rosary, representing spirituality and the fourth assumes the '*varda mudra*', symbol of the fulfillment of the devotee's wishes.⁴

An intimate study of the symbolism and hand gestures employed by Chughtai in his paintings reveals that he has a predilection for using *mudras* as a sign language.

Behind the Mountain, (Fig.11) is a Chughtai painting of a secret reunion between a couple who are in love. The couple is probably Shiva and Paravati. The right hand of Shiva is raised in a gesture employing the *abhaya mudra*, which reads 'fear not', Shiva seems to be consoling Paravati not to be frightened, as no one would come to know of their meeting.

A Chughtai Drawing Fig.12 is of a male figure holding a lotus flower. The figure assumes the *katakamukha mudra*. It may be assumed it is a Hindu deity since the lotus flower is associated with deities. The sartorial simplicity also suggests it is a humble son of the soil, with religious and mystical inclination.

Tapasvi, (Fig.13) is a Chughtai drawing representing Buddha in meditation, hands folded together in the prayer gesture or the *anjali mudra*.

When Chughtai started interpreting Iqbalian thoughts and Muslim ideology for his illustration of Amle Chughtai he was faced with a difficult task. Primarily so, because Islam generally eschews from religious iconography. Chughtai conceived visual-metaphors to depict these abstract ideas and philosophical concepts employing syncretic as well as self-created symbolism; forming a new

visual script, potent enough to embody much more than is seen merely by the physical eye.

The slave girl, is an aesthetically crafted front-view portrait of a black slave girl, who is waiting on her mistress, in awesome self-dignity. Yet holding her mistress's slippers in the palm of her hand, with profound respect.

The index finger of her right hand bent back in a manner that suggests it is a *mudra*. This hand symbol is different in the sense that it does not appear in Indian art, nor in any other art. But is dissimilar to the dainty affected bend of the fingers seen in the paintings of Chughtai's Romantic works.

Centrally placed, mimetic in nature, this powerful hand gesture seems to be a self-created visual symbol of Chughtai. Marcella expresses:

The small, thin hands with a finger or two bent back is another Chughtai device repeated in various paintings from 1921 to about 1930. I do not think this stylized hand gesture was influenced by the work of the Bengal School artist....but Chughtai's gesture is quite unique. Neither does this gesture occur in Persian, Mughal or Rajput miniature painting; consequently I suggest that Chughtai either created this gesture or was influenced by Hindu and Buddhist sculpture or the frescoes of Ajanta.⁵

Marcella's observation is correct in as far as the dainty hard gesture of Chughtai's art is concerned, (Fig.14). But the communicative and confident hand gesture that occupies the center of the composition of 'The Slave Girl', is too powerful and too prominently placed to be of no significance.

Marcella does not offer any interpretation of this particular gesture, nor does any other scholar. She is apt in stating that Chughtai's paintings "...express a complex iconography which has yet to be studied."⁶ She also states:

Yet while various scholars have discussed individual paintings by Chughtai, the majority of their writings are merely descriptions or appreciations of the colour, line, and composition and tell little about the subject matter or meaning of the content.⁷

Chughtai wrote a commentary for each of his illustrations of Amle Chughtai, which throws some light on his individual painting. Yet he does not elucidate interpretation of the symbolism. Deliberately abstaining from given revealing explanation of his complex visual-metaphors, at times suggesting inguision. In his life time, shy as he was, Chughtai never spoke much about his work, not even with friends, relatives or prospective buyers, wishing that others should comprehend and appreciate his work.

In the commentary of 'The Slave Girl', Chughtai evokes interpretation of this gesture. He writes, "the center of interest beholds a mystery that requires to be solved."⁸ Right in the center of the painting are the hands of the slave girl, holding the slippers in the palm of the left hand. While the index finger of the right hand is bent upwards in communication. It is relevant, in order to de-codify this gesture that the Persian verse of Iqbal it illustrates should be translated and understood.

من به سیمائے غلامان فرّ سلطان دیده ام
شعله محمود از خاک ایاز آید برون

I have witnessed on the forehead [face] of slaves the dignity and majesty of kings. I have seen in the appearance of Ayaz the attributes of Mahmud.⁹

The famous parable of Mahmud Ghaznavi, (998-1030), the king, and Ayaz, his most trusted and faithful, slave is often quoted in Persian and Urdu literature. The dignity, wisdom, sincerity, and unabounding affection of Ayaz for his master, Mahmud, earned him an unrivalled position in the king's heart and subsequently in his court. Hence the understanding that there was no difference between the slave and the master, one being synonymous with the other.

Iqbal manifests Ayaz with the qualities of Mard-e-Momin and Mard-e-Kamil, or a perfect example of an ideal Muslim. Inferring that even though a Muslim's body may be in captivity his spirit cannot be enslaved. By the virtue of his willpower an enlightened slave, who remains steadfast to his belief and virtuous in character, can de facto possess the

qualities of kings.

The aesthetic acumen of Chughtai being displayed in the portrayal of Ayaz (a male), with the physiognomy of a black slave girl. Brimming with dignity, fortitude, self-respect and virtue. Visual embodiment of spiritual and mystical love, perhaps in a trance of '*samdi*' (self-transcendentalism). To enhance the visual impact that could contain these abstract concepts of Iqbal, Chughtai conceived this visual-metaphor. Evocative of the hand gesture employed by the Muslims in the '*namaz*' (prayer), symbolizing the 'Oneness of Allah', and a sine qua non for the Muslim faith.

Derivation of this gesture from the Muslim *namaz*, is an adaptation of a Muslim symbol to put forth the Muslim faith. Seated on the legs, that are bent back, both hands resting on the knees, *Tasheed* is read, while the index finger of the right hand is raised as to reiterate a Muslim's belief in the 'Oneness of God'. Thus this gesture means, 'One', or 'One God', or 'being united as one'.

Chughtai writes in the commentary of this illustration that it carries multiple meaning. Possibly it is a symbol of spiritual love that exists between the slave girl and her mistress, which indicates they are one i.e. united in spirit.

It may also be a symbol of the mystic and sufi concept of love, that suggests abnegation of the self that could lead to absorption of the soul with the Divine Spirit.

Whatever the interpretation, it would be appropriate to consider that the *mudra* is Islamic in origin, a creation of Chughtai adopted from the act of performing '*namaz*'.

This observation is further strengthened by the study of Chughtai's imagery which reveals that Chughtai was already employing Muslim religious hand-gestures. The '*I'd Moon*', (Fig.15) is a Chughtai painting in which, a child, his mother and grandmother sight the new moon of *I'd*. The two ladies raise their hands in prayer or *dua*. A common Muslim gesture assumed while *dua* is read after *namaz* or on sighting of the new moon. The hands are joined together, palms facing upwards, raised in a gesture similar to 'the begging of alms'. Only in this case God is the giver of all blessings, that man can conceive of, and ask for.

Yet, another religious hand-gesture of the Muslims, is the one employed by the Sultan in the painting of Chughtai, *Sultan and The Saint*, (Fig.16). The Sultan, a pious man, listens attentively to the guidance being delivered by the saint. The hands of the Sultan are folded, right one on top of the left, close to the heart. This gesture is almost similar to that assumed by Muslims during prayer i.e. *namaz*, while in the standing position, symbolizing 'submission to Allah'. In the case of the Sultan, it is an anomaly since, women rest their hands on the chest, close to the heart, whereas men place their hands on the abdomen. Perhaps a deliberate change to suggest the submission of the Sultan, and also to portray the weak and passive side of his nature. As opposed to the active role being suggested by the saint, similar to that visualized in the poetry of Iqbal, of a true Mard-e-Momin.

Further analysis of the hand gestures created by Chughtai determines that he has employed the mudra of the black slave girl for his other paintings, as well. Likewise the index finger of the right hand of the saint in the, Sultan and the Saint, assumes this *mudra*, a representation of the Muslim belief in one God. The saint forcefully yet amiably counsels the sultan to submit to the might of Allah and to remain steadfast to it. To seek strength and power from Him, who would then guide him in the able and just governance of his people. And to act in the way of God.

Similarly, in the Will and the Way, (Fig.17), a Muslim woman holds her child in her right hand, as she must, since she seems to be sending her husband on a mission, to act in the way of Allah. Whereas the index finger of her left hand, which is free, employs the oneness or faith *mudra*, placed like a crown at the top of the Mujahid's head. Perhaps symbolizing that the woman is giving the mujahid strength and impelling him to act and take on the role of a true Muslim. Chughtai recognizes the power and influence a woman can instill in a man. In this case, the force of her own personality, emanates from her unflinching belief in God, and her determination to act according to His will.

Chughtai posed an enigma that required solving. He must have envisaged that it would be years before his art would be fully read. Displaying no signs of being impatient; keeping his self-created visual-vocabulary elusive. Like poetry, investing his art with multiple meaning, that would continue to unfold itself from time to time. A device, by means of which Chughtai sought to invigorate his art with pulsating life,¹⁰ yet fuse it with abstract aesthetic attributes, characteristic of his art and style.

References

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5. Marcella Nesom Sirhandi, A.R. Chughtai: A Modern South Asian Artist, unpublished PHD Dissertation. (Ohio State University, 1984) II, 107.
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7. *Ibid*, III, 165
8. A.R. Chughtai, Amle Chughtai, commentary, The Slave Girl, translation by the author.
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10. A.R. Chughtai, Chughtai's Indian Painting, S. Kashmira Singh, (Delhi: Dhoomi Mal Dharam Das, 1951) p.7



Fig 1: The Slave Girl, A.R. Chughtai, Amle Chughtai



Fig 2: Dhyana mudra



Fig 3:
Bhumi - sparsa mudra



Fig 4:
Dharma Chakra mudra



Fig 5:
Abhaya mudra



Fig 6:
Vitarka mudra



Fig 7:
Anjali mudra



Fig 8:
Katakamukha mudra



Fig 9:
Ardha - chandra mudra



Fig 10: 'Brahma', Aihole, 6th-7th Cen. A.D.
Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay



Fig 11: 'Behind the Mountain'
A.R. Chughtai, Chughtai's Indian Painting



Fig 12: 'Drawing'
A.R. Chughtai, Chughtai's Indian Painting



Fig 13: 'Tapasvi'
A.R. Chughtai, Chughtai's Indian Painting



Fig 14: 'Persian Idyll'
A.R. Chughtai, Muraqqa-e-Chughtai



Fig 15: 'I'd Moon'
A.R. Chughtai, Muraqqa-e-Chughtai



Fig 16: 'Sultan and the Saint'
A.R. Chughtai, Amle Chughtai



Fig 17: 'Will and the Way'
A.R. Chughtai, Amle Chughtai