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Comparative Analysis of Indrajīt's Nāgapāśa Episode in Four Illustrated Rāmāyaṇa Manuscripts

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Abstract

This study focuses on a fleeting moment in the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* when Indrajīt ensnares Lakṣmaṇa with the *Nāgapāśa* (Sanskrit: *नागपाश*, lit. "serpent noose"), a divine weapon fashioned from serpents that symbolizes supernatural restraint. Four significant illustrated manuscripts attest to the scene: Akbar's illustrated Persian *Rāmāyaṇa*, c.1584; 'Abd al-Raḥīm's Freer volume, approximately dated 1590-1610; the early eighteenth-century Shangri Rāmāyaṇa from the Punjab Hills; and the Mewar codex, finalised between 1649 and 1653. A meticulous iconographic and contextual analysis reveals that regional patronage, local aesthetics, and devotional practices influenced each brushstroke. The compositional hierarchy, colour coding, figure representation, and spatial depth exhibit significant variation among the Mughal-Persian circle, Himalayan workshops, and Rajput ateliers. Nevertheless, all maintain the fundamental Hindu symbolism inherent in the plot twist, demonstrating how each audience required their aesthetic. The research elucidates how South Asian manuscript art continually redefined its lexicon while consistently reiterating sacred narratives, despite the intersection and amalgamation of diverse politics and cultures.

Keywords: *Rāmāyaṇa* manuscripts, Indrajīt, *Nāgapāśa*, Mughal painting, Pahari painting, Rajput painting, comparative iconography, visual narrative

The Serpent's Coil: Narrative Foundations and Religious Significance

The *Nāgapāśa*episode in Indrajīt's meeting with Rāma is one of the most exhilarating moments in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, a striking conflict when dharma encounters its antithesis, chaos. In the *Yuddha-kāṇḍa* (Sanskrit: *युद्धकाण्ड*), that scene serves as a pivotal moment: for a fleeting, breathless instant, the demons appear to get the upper hand, compelling the ultimate divine intervention into the narrative's constrained timeline. Illustrations in manuscripts created for South Asian courts from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries exhibit intriguing variations. These stylistic variances convey more than mere decoration; they suggest localised religious perspectives, regional identities, and the differing devotional practices preferred by patrons of painting from distant thrones.

Indrajīt, also known as Meghanāda in some texts, is regarded as arguably the most formidable opponent faced by Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa during their long siege of Laṅkā. His name roughly means "conqueror of Indra," and mythology indicates that he once humiliated the king of the gods, an act that established him as both a master swordsman and a powerful master of astras. When he

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relinquishes the *Nāgapāśa*, the ordinary arrowdoes not depart from the bow; instead, the shaft transforms mid-flight into serpentine forms that entwine with the principles of magic rather than metal. Ensnared by the serpentine coils, the heroes endure a toxic restraint and a peculiar form of immobility, stemming from sorcery's psychological hold rather than sheer physical force.

Early artists of the *Rāmāyaṇa* drew heavily from the events described in the Vālmīki text. Their images vividly brought the conflict to life even before photography existed. In that ancient Sanskrit story, Indrajīt sees Aṅgada as unbearably arrogant. Anger erupts as the demon prince unleashes his signature barrage. Serpent-shaped arrows fly from his bow, hissing as they pierce Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa's flesh. This one point in the broader narrative abruptly unveils a profound chasm of intricate theology and practice within Hindu philosophy. The serpent imagery illustrates that the concepts of destroyer and protector are complex; they intertwine creation and destruction, ultimately perceived as the rope that can either ensnare the soul or elevate it to a celestial realm. The *Nāgapāśa*, as subsequent commentators consistently emphasize, operates dually as an instrument of divine retribution and a moral crucible—testing the hero's commitment to *dharma* and exposing the occasional failure of the gods to sustain cosmic equilibrium. The coiling snakes depicted in both illustrated folios and sculptural programs become visual metaphors for temporal recurrence, the constricting logic of *karma*, and a metaphysical proposition wherein consciousness ultimately seeks liberation from material constraint.

In the four analysed manuscripts, each workshop faced the identical challenge of representing Rama and Lakṣmaṇa as bound and powerless without compromising their divine dignity. Sacred illustrators addressed this paradox by illustrating a temporary reduction of divine power while maintaining eternal sanctity, employing binding chains that enhanced narrative drama and fostered devotion rather than implying ultimate defeat. Four distinct texts formulated unique solutions: the Akbar-commissioned Persian *Rāmāyaṇa* translated Hindu mythology into an imperial Persian vernacular, whereas the Freer Gallery manuscript commissioned by ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Khān-i-Khānān combined opulent Persian page designs with *Rāmāyaṇa* narratives, its embellishments subtly evoking the archways of Safavid albums.

The *Shangri Rāmāyaṇa* exemplifies a Himalayan manuscript painting tradition rooted in the Pahari courts of Bahu and Kulu, characterized by a contemplative and restrained aesthetic. Compositions are structured more symbolically than narratively, inviting reflective engagement rather than theatrical immersion. The use of stylized forms, a limited chromatic range, and uniform spatial arrangements underscores a devotional sensibility, resonating with the spiritual aspirations of its intended audience—whether monastic or courtly.

The Mewar*Rāmāyaṇa* exemplifies the opulent artistry of the Rajput courts, meticulously overseen by the master painter Sahibdin under the patronage of Jagat Singh I. For the Sisodia dynasty, which traced its lineage to Rāma, the epic was not merely a sacred narrative but a visual affirmation of ancestral legitimacy. Its sumptuous illustrations served to reinforce dynastic pride and articulate a cultural counter-narrative to Mughal imperial aesthetics.

An in-depth analysis of the four traditions illustrates the adaptability of Hindu visual culture to reinvent itself while maintaining its fundamental religious and cultural identities, especially during politically tumultuous or multicultural periods. Each regional style developed a unique method for transforming religious narratives into visual representations, resulting in a multifaceted corpus of

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devotional art that continues to influence contemporary interpretations and discussions of the epics. The *Nāgapāśa*story, intertwining defeat with divinity and bound with liberation, serves as a particularly incisive lens for examining the diverse narratives and expressions of faith shown in paint, stone, or cloth.

Imperial Visions and Regional Expressions: Patronage and Cultural Context
The Akbari Synthesis: Persian Translation and Visual Innovation

When Akbar focused on the illuminated manuscript, an extraordinary development emerged in Mughal art. The emperors' atelier in Fatehpur Sikri resonated with calligraphy, pigments, and debates on the appearance of a Hindu epic rendered in Persian script. The lamp's light flickered on newly gilded leaves as palace academics diligently worked on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, their year-long endeavour extending from 1574 into the subsequent decade.

Their experiment extended beyond language; each phase added new meaning, sometimes transformative, sometimes subtle. Sanskrit verses first went through Awadhi interpretation, adjusting their rhythm for a wider audience. Persian poets then refined these versions, aligning them with the elegance of courtly language, in line with Akbar's vision of literary excellence. Artists, working alongside scribes, aimed to visualize exile, flight, and abduction as if for the first time, raising images to a narrative level equal to verse. This collaborative effort established visual principles that would influence Mughal manuscripts for generations.

A page from Akbar's *Rāmāyaṇa*, illustrated in Figure 1, portrays the moment when Indrajīt ensnares Rama and Lakṣmaṇa with a captivating dart. The artwork, depicted by Basawan and executed by Surajyu Gujrati, merges austere Persian linework with the graceful contours of Indian form, characteristic of the emperor's atelier. The conventional Persian technique of bird's-eye views and elaborate margins, presumably enabled by Kesu Das. No single element predominates the canvas; rather, stance interacts with pose, gaze reciprocates gaze, and an extraordinary tranquilly pervades their collective area. The *Nāgapāśa* episode is notably intricate, surprisingly so for a narrative grounded in imperial court culture. The serpents, their bodies undulating in fluid, cursive movements, seem to glide across the paper while adhering to the intricate technique commonly favoured by Persian artisans. Their sinuous coils generate rhythmic patterns, subtly reflecting Hindu notions of time that expand and contract like a universe breathing; Mughal-domed gates and cloud-adorned arches create the foundational grid and discreetly remind viewers of the connection to the red-sandstone palace.

Aristocratic Refinement: The Freer Rāmāyaṇa and Persianate Culture

Freer *Rāmāyaṇa*, commissioned by ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Khān-i Khānān with Emperor Akbar's backing, fuses courtly Persian polish with a deeply Hindu storyline. The volume now rests in the Freer Gallery of Art and marks a moment when Mughal nobles could order works that met royal benchmarks yet still voiced their taste. Historians read the commission as more than patronage; it shadows debates about religious openness, cultural mixing, and the role of literature in the Mughal court. Figure 2 depicts Lakṣmaṇa reeling from Indrajīt's enchanted arrows; the brushwork and gilding are attributed to the artist Faḍl. The folio organises its narrative into distinct layers, allowing each panel to depict a different moment of the same crisis—a clever technique derived from Persian manuscript tradition that aligns seamlessly with Hindu epic conventions. This split indicates the

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extent to which the Persian storytelling sensibility had assimilated the logic of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Flat, unblended colour fields dot the Freer *Rāmāyaṇa* and immediately recall a Persian habit of sky-and-surface painting. The hues do not melt into one another; they butt rather than blend and thus keep a hard-edged stillness. Balance arrives through quiet adjacency rather than through intrusive shading.
Yet, when placed alongside Basavana's much earlier illustration of Indrajīt's magical serpent-arrows—one of the finest paintings in the Jaipur manuscript (no. 104)—Fazl's work appears remarkably uninspired. Basavana's composition thrums with dynamism: Rama and Lakṣmaṇa, along with Sugrīva and Jambavān, are entangled in a swirling swarm of serpents, their figures rendered helpless in a startled ensemble. By contrast, Fazl retains only Indrajīt's figure among the swirling clouds in the upper right, stripping away the visceral tension of the scene (Seyller, 1986). A bare-headed Lakṣmaṇa, whose loosened turban has been painted out, limply rests his head and arm on his knee, and Sugrīva and Jambavān stand with their arms folded lightly, as though posing for court portraiture rather than reacting to a deadly assault (Seyller, 1986). Rama himself is oddly exempt from the paralyzing effects of the arrows, which lie passively before him, removing any visible cause for his companions'-stricken condition (Seyller, 1986).

Fazl's additions to the landscape are equally formulaic: a flat green ground dotted with a few rocks and a solitary flowering tree, with hillocks lightly veined in pink and pale green—elements that recall the Persian penchant for stylized terrain but do little to evoke the drama of the *Rāmāyaṇa* crisis (Seyller, 1986). In sum, while the Freer folio demonstrates technical mastery in layer-based narrative and color restraint, it lacks the emotive force and compositional inventiveness found in Basavana's Jaipur exemplar. This contrast underscores not only the evolving tastes of Mughal patrons but also the nuanced tensions between Persianate aesthetic conventions and the demands of Hindu epic storytelling.

Himalayan Contemplation: The Shangri Rāmāyaṇa and Pahari Aesthetics

The Shangri *Rāmāyaṇa*, an extensive series of paintings created from the late 17th to the mid-18th century, exemplifies a powerful and distinctive tradition in Pahari art. Its exact origin has been a topic of considerable scholarly debate; while historically linked to Kulu, compelling stylistic evidence now points to the court of Bahu in the Jammu region as the place where its earliest and most influential folios were produced. This attribution challenges previous theories and places the work within the specific patronage of Hindu courts in the Punjab Hills. Stylistically, the series represents a notable departure from the naturalism common in imperial Mughal workshops. The artists used bold, flat planes of color and assertive, planar compositions. In dramatic scenes, such as the portrayal of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa caught in the *Nāgapāśa* (serpent-arrows), the monumental figures are depicted with stark compositional clarity. This method emphasizes emotional intensity and narrative strength over realistic detail, showing how moments of divine peril are conveyed through a simplified and powerful visual style.

This confluence of visual idioms reflects the composite nature of hill-state manuscript production, where no single hand governed the entirety of the work. Rather, each folio section manifests unique painterly characteristics—a restrained palette of soft ochres, pale greens, and desaturated earth tones, applied with a noticeably dry, almost chalky brushwork. Such aesthetic decisions appear calibrated to subordinate visual spectacle, inviting contemplative engagement with the textual content.

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Consistent profile views maintained at a similar height emerge throughout the series, compelling each figure into an iconic silhouette where interior sentiment prevails over rigid realism. The vast scale, reminiscent of perceiving the deity from a high ledge across the valley, is also reflected in the first Himalayan thangka grids, which organised scenes into orderly horizontal bands from the eleventh century onwards.

In the centre of the image, Rāmand Lakṣmaṇaserenely confront their destiny, ensnared by serpents cascading from the sky like rain upon their heads and faces, while legions of monkeys and bears stand respectfully and composedly on either side, observing the sombre tableau of their fate with sorrowful expressions.

Rajput Devotion: The Mewar Rāmāyaṇa and Clan Identity

The production of the Mewar *Rāmāyaṇa*, a monumental manuscript commissioned under Maharana Jagat Singh I of Mewar, is dated between 1649 and 1653. Importantly, the project was not stopped by the death of its patron in 1652; it was completed in its final year under his successor, Maharana Raj Singh I. Although the project was carried out by several artists in the royal workshop, including Manohar, who finished the first book in 1649, the master artist Sāhibdīn is credited with illustrating most of the later, highly acclaimed sections.

The ambitious scale of the undertaking reflects a devotional and political enterprise where material expense was secondary to the grandeur of the final creation. This resulted in a large-format manuscript comprising hundreds of illustrated folios, signifying one of the most extensive and lavishly produced *Rāmāyaṇa* manuscripts of its time.Scholars continue to discuss such proportions since, fundamentally, no one else in the hills possessed the wealth or status to replicate them. This event represents the pinnacle of Rajput literary craftsmanship.

Lakṣmaṇa, constrained by Indrajīt, is illustrated in Figure 4; shades of aquamarine and ochre envelop him like a moth trapped in glass. The page utilises two graphic bands, one elevated and the other positioned alongside the riverbed, to alternatively guide readers' attention left, then right, then back again. Rāma's tent is located on the filler strip nearest to the spine, symbolising the stronghold of virtues for the platoon. Laṅkāpura flows across the opposing side like smoke, highlighting the page's vexatious half. Readers of that century often remarked that the tensions in the novel mirrored the struggles occurring outside the town, when Hindu maharajas consistently resisted or negotiated with Muslim troops.

The Sisodia dynasty of Mewar, asserting direct lineage from Rāma, perceived the *Rāmāyaṇa* not as a remote fable but as their familial history. This conviction influenced the depiction of the epic episodes, as each representation was required to honour holy ancestors while motivating contemporary rulers to undertake audacious actions. Vibrant reds and rich yellows permeate the margins, showcasing the court's opulence and craftsmanship while bestowing upon the subject matter the dignity it inherently possesses.

Sahibdin employs compositional techniques to integrate multiple time-stamps into a unified canvas during the *Nāgapāśa* incident. Eleven distinct beats observe Indrajīt transitioning from a strategic meeting with Rāvaṇa to the instant the serpent arrows immobilise the brothers. Such layered activity

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delineates the devotional intent of a manuscript page, allowing worshippers to contemplate each detail as their thoughts follow the expanse of divine force.

The ritualistic nature of the Mewar *Rāmāyaṇa* is most vividly illustrated in the miniatures depicting Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa in a prostrate position on the ground. Despite the time of shame, their bows, traditional dress, and floral garlands are rendered with such meticulous attention that observers cannot help but perceive an enduring divine dignity. The painting functions as a shrine-like focal point for meditation, subtly reminding adherents that dharma will ultimately triumph, despite occasional setbacks of its proponents.

The conditions surrounding the manuscript's commissioning reflect the evolving political landscape of late-seventeenth-century Rajput palaces. Mewar, newly captured by Mughal authority following prolonged conflict, now had a unique, albeit tenuous, calm that facilitated cultural interaction while enabling each court to maintain its distinct identity. The opulent *Rāmāyaṇa* project serves as a striking emblem of Hindu cultural resilience and a witness to Mewar's affluence under Mughal dominion.

Visual Strategies and Artistic Innovation: Comparative Analysis of the Nāgapāśa Episode
Compositional Organization and Spatial Dynamics

This study focusses on four paintings from four illustrated manuscripts, each structuring their graphic space in a manner that seems intuitive to the originating culture. The limits of page count and binding affected every culture; yet, the compositional choices were distinctly unique, indicating diverse aesthetic and religious roots whenever a civilisation chose to represent its deity or hero.

This episode of the Akbar *Rāmāyaṇa* (Figure 1) features scenes arranged in overlapping diagonal compositions, directing the viewer's attention across the page before the recognition of any specific element. Serpents coil around the chest and shoulder, hills ascend above a cluster of apprehensive horsemen, and shadows surge forward as if the entire story had been abruptly inscribed onto the paper. A Mughal patron would have expected that density; storylines partially concealed by court poets necessitated concrete record, and the multitude of forms presented here satisfies that need with steadfast literalism. Intersecting forms reflect the confined, chaotic nature of the *Nāgapāśa* moment, but the slanted surfaces permit movement to extend beyond the leaf's cut edge. In this composition, sinuous, interlacing lines permeate the entire visual field, evoking the dramatic entanglement of Laocoön and his sons with serpents. Meanwhile, the astonished expression of the Monkey King on the right gestures toward the Persian pictorial convention of placing a finger to the mouth as an emblem of wonder or exclamation.

The Freer *Rāmāyaṇa* (Figure 2) arranges its elements into two rigid registers—an oblique sky featuring Indrajīt and a braided noose above, with heroes positioned beneath on textured earth—preserving discrete functions yet conveying them simultaneously. The division advances the story along a vertical axis of power, temporarily placing demonic strength above the mortal siblings who will finally triumph. Images are organised in a vertical series, signifying advancement.The artist aligns shoulders, sleeves, and sword hilts along rigid verticals, rendering even a legendary conflict orderly, nearly governed. The contrast between precise draughtsmanship and dynamic axes reflects the Persian preference for orderly grids, a tendency the artist adapted to accommodate the more fluid narrative rhythms of a Sanskrit epic.

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The Shangri *Rāmāyaṇa* (Figure 3) employs an alternative configuration, positioning two groups of monkey warriors flanking Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa against a backdrop of nearly uniform green. The composition emulates Pahari panels, where tranquilly, rather than movement, captivates the viewer; although there is discord in the narrative, the symmetry seeks to mitigate it. By eliminating deep perspective, the composition allows each figure to occupy equal prominence regardless of its position, sacrificing dynamic tension for mere symbolic weight. Empty areas redirect focus from adornments, fostering reflective consideration of the extraordinary story at the ornate centre. This seeming simplicity is crucial, since it transforms the panel into a cognitive focus point, similar to how a meditative thangka delineates a particular deity.

The Mewar Rāmāyaṇa dissects narrative rhythm, juxtaposing two streams of activity on parallel accounts. On the left, followers congregate in sorrowful clusters around the brothers' bodies; on the right, troops progress in sombre, nearly militaristic formations, confronting adversity with disciplined determination. Sahibdin employs a dual register, juxtaposing shock and strategy, allowing us to perceive Indraj's loss alongside the impending turmoil that ultimately consumed the entire court.In many panels of the Mewar codex, miniatures depict Rajput concepts of dharma as circular knots of figures that encircle and nearly cradle a holy image, even in seemingly dire circumstances. To the right, orderly arranged paintingadvances in a linear formation, subtly alluding to the expansive, perpetual military theatre in which this skirmish represents merely a transient episode. The juxtaposition of circles and lines weaves the narrative through its omissions, suggesting that contemporary suffering is both ephemeral and, paradoxically, a precursor to the enduring victory foretold by tradition.

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Linear Expression and Form Treatment

The treatment of line and contour among the four manuscripts indicates a divergence in artistic perspective and technical practice, reflecting broader cultural sentiments. The division is most pronounced in the sequences where arrows abruptly transform into constricting serpents; each iteration addresses the issue of supernatural transformation uniquely.

In the folio belongs to the Akbar's codex, strokes exhibit a practically cursive fluidity—hills undulate in elongated sweeps, serpents twist in delicate arabesques, and the forms of men convey a relaxed, natural rhythm. The painter meticulously capture the organic essence of the snakes, rendering them as credible creatures while also adhering to the narrative's requirement for the extraordinary. This equilibrium demonstrates the Mughal court's endeavour for a verisimilitude that would appease Persian criticism and fulfil Hindu devotees simultaneously.At the edge it, brush strokes undulate and throb as if the paper were alive. The meandering coils serve as a visual metaphor for the cosmic forces propelling the narrative, alluding to the cyclical nature of mortality. When considered collectively, they suggest that an unusual equilibrium, inclusive of karma, will

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ultimately establish itself inside the scenario. The artwork oscillates between freehand strokes and structured latticework, as the artist endeavours to merge Islamic rationality with the Hindu concept of formlessness.

In the Freer copy, the linework becomes more restrained, exchanging serpentine flow for a backbone of straight edges that confines the forms like to blueprints. The distinct separation between linear anatomy and swirling clouds reflects the Persian principle of categorising the dynamic from the static. A painted sword that twists like a vine is nevertheless wielded as a decorative element, serving both to advance the narrative and to function as a border theme.

The Shangri miniature painting, in contrast, explores the dialectic of line present in Pahari painting. The Hindu story and Buddhist adornment converge on the same folio, creating artistic complexities. Dragons contort in elegant arabesques that signify their celestial status, whereas each human figure is rendered with sharp, linear contours. The silhouette effect eliminates the distractions of imitation, allowing the observer to interpret the symbol instantly. The simplified linear aesthetic of the Shangri text has a subtly contemplative function, delineating forms that readily imprint on memory and facilitate subsequent contemplation. The distinctive serpentine curves maintain its fundamental identity while eliminating the elaborate natural details that could distract from the image's essential meaning. This approach reflects enduring Hindu artistic traditions, wherein a purposeful simplification of form enhances mental concentration and elevates spiritual perception.

The Mewar copy showcases the painter’s oscillation between expansive cursive strokes and rapid straight lines, visually reflecting the Rajput culture's dual focus on martial honour and religious devotion. The depicted limbs appear almost puppet-like, exhibiting a purposeful rigidity that emphasises the figures' martial. The arrows penetrating the bent, bleeding figures, depicted as straight lines, enhance the scene's ferocity in a clear and impactful manner, both in form and concept.

Colour Symbolism and Surface Treatment

The selected colour schemes in the four existing manuscript families reflect the inherited ideals and religious practices of their commissioning patrons. Colour variations rapidly transform into assertions; for example, a crimson sword may elicit heavenly ire, even if the colouration is merely decorative.

The Akbari style juxtaposes vibrant hues with delicate wash layers so adeptly that skirts, foliage, and storm clouds seem to undulate on the page. Highlights coexist with flat colours, achieving three-dimensionality while maintaining pure surface design. The chromatic combinations diligently fulfil Persian preferences for refinement while subtly meeting Hindu anticipations of sacred hues.The devotional pictures commissioned by Akbar adhere to Sanskrit tradition while yet embracing Mughal elegance. Rāma is adorned in his traditional indigo attire, a definitive emblem of Viṣṇu, while the garments radiate in red and gold, reflecting the court's inherent grandeur. The curved blades are adorned with vivid greens and blues, resembling extensions of the cosmic sea rather than forged steel, but providing the grandeur expected of a royal library.

In the Freer volume, colours are arranged meticulously, resembling tiles, allowing warm draperies to stand out against intentionally subdued backgrounds. There are no gradients of merging present; each wash retains its distinct tone, facilitating comparison with the subsequent one. The recall of the Persian influence transcends mere style; it compels the observer to interpret colour as a symbol and

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embellishment rather than as light and form, evoking a spiritual environment instead of a tangible one.

The hues in the Freer manuscript—subdued blues, sharp greys, and golden highlights—are intended not to astonish but to elicit tranquilly. This palette defines tranquil regions on the page, enabling the emergence of red, ochre, and sienna in the garments to reverberate like prayer bells. The juxtaposition of colours against their backgrounds is a crucial element in directing the viewer's attention.
The Shangri text presents a wall of deep pine green with a subdued matte texture that eschews flamboyance, while permitting occasional bursts of scarlet, saffron, and sky blue. The lush area functions as both the riverbed known to the artists of Neelam valleys and the sanctuary of meditation where insight first emerges. In Pahari hands, soil and knowledge are inextricably linked, with each nurturing the other.

Similar to the horizon's sky, the serpents descending are characterised by a juxtaposition of dark and light hues, signifying their spatial reliance on the same sky that denotes their origin, yet failing to reveal the individual who liberated them from the heavens to the earth.

The Mewar replica emanates vivid crimson, blue, green, and cream, with colours cascading over chariots, elephants, and soldiers, evoking the dramatic spectacle of Rajput warfare while honouring its spiritual theme. The vibrant colouration results from the economic power and artistic assurance of the Mewar court, transforming a religious narrative into a visual spectacle. The Rajput audience perceived the *Rāmāyaṇa* as an eternal cosmic epic and a personal familial tale, necessitating a visual aesthetic that was sufficiently large for deities and intimate for ancestors. Here, colour functions as a coded language of clan loyalty and dynasty power, rather than merely as ornamentation. Crimson hues conjure Rajput valour and the fierce sakti associated with royal lineage, while deep azure and polished gold suggest cosmic harmony and divine governance. The curved swords and tridents are depicted in colours that emphasise their threat while simultaneously binding them to dharma, such that observing the illustrations may evoke both devout contemplation and a strikingly tangible political determination.

Figure Treatment and Iconographic Conventions

The representation of human bodies by artists in the illustrated manuscripts transcends mere stylistic choice; it reveals the foundational devotional beliefs inherent in each culture. As the images shift to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, the tension intensifies. The artists must balance a progressing story, an elevated perspective, and adherence to local customs as demanded by consumers.

Akbar's copy prominently displays three-quarter and profile viewpoints. The intertwining of bodies with the myriad snakes presents and the orientation of faces to the left and right convey a sense of astonishment and despair amidst an unexpected and unfamiliar weapon. The psychology of figures extends beyond posture to encompass facial micro-expressions and unvoiced movements that subtly convey the narratives of one's inner emotional state. Notably, even in apparent defeat, the divine brothers maintain their composure, exuding a tranquil nobility that suggests ordinary conflicts cannot disturb their profound serenity. Alongside them, courtiers exhibit a range of emotions—confusion, grief, or resolve—expressed in brief gestures; the rapid changes in their expressions evoke spectator compassion while underscoring the inevitability of the gods' ultimate triumph.

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The visual minimalism maintains a regal essence, mirroring the dignified ambiance of the most precious palace manuscripts. The painting utilises gestures profoundly shaped by Persian artistic tradition while concurrently depicting a Hindu epic narrative. The outstretched positions of bound heroes—discarded swords, supine bodies—preserve enough heavenly symbolism for observers to identify these images, even in their degradation, as originating from a higher domain. These details are excessively refined for a simple workshop; they suggest aristocratic sponsorship and indicate a court already familiar with cultural exchange.

In Shangri, the text restricts its inhabitants to uniform lateral viewpoints, featuring faces that are quietly enigmatic and almost severe. Each shape is depicted flatly for swift recognition, a choice that seems more respectful than representational. The principal and revered figures are situated centrally within the painting, flanked by two columns of monkey and bear armies, like a sacred altar before hallowed icons rather than a realistic depiction of conflict. Researchers examining the Shangri paintings frequently observe their intentional employment of costume as a concise indicator of character identity. The robes and accessories convey significance rather than ostentation, allowing the observer to focus on the spiritual narrative without distraction.

The Mewar text showcases profile views that display layered silk, helmets, and jewelled turbans. Rajput martial pageantry vividly evokes the royal ancestors ingrained in the dynasty's collective memory for both contemporary patrons and priests. The grand proportions bestow upon the heroes an almost divine height, uniting temple wall and court register in a singular view. Sahib Din compresses the entire event into a singular "conceptual view," merging foreground and backdrop, so presenting several moments—such as Indrajīt positioned on his chariot and subsequently after releasing the serpent noose—within the same plane. Clusters of stylised grasses and low shrubs serve as informal markers, directing the gaze horizontally over the battlefield without genuine spatial depth. Each figure is delineated with a crisp black line and filled with uniform colour: the verdant field, the crimson and yellow borders, and the vibrant blues and ochres of the attire all enhance the ornamental clarity of the image (Losty, 2008, p. 16). The Nāgapāśa is depicted as two symmetrical snakes, each possessing a highly angled, diamond-shaped hood, entwined in a flawless binding loop around Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, symbolising magical captivity rather than a simple physical lasso. Indrajīt is depicted with a green-tinged complexion, a modest jewelled headdress, and servants armed with bows—conventions associated with Rajput asuras. Hanumān's depiction in this folio emphasises his function as the pivotal saviour. He enters the scene with one leg extended forward and the other bent, generating a tangible feeling of movement towards the captured Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. His right hand is elevated, palm facing outward—a traditional defensive posture—while his left hand clutches a gada (mace), symbolising his heavenly power. Sahib Din accentuates Hanumān’s significance by rendering him somewhat larger than the other princes, utilising delicate black outlines and flat, unshaded areas of saffron and russet. These stylistic decisions condense temporal and spatial dimensions into a singular “conceptual view,” directing our focus explicitly on Hanumān’s heroic act (Losty, 2008, pp. 102–103).

Background Elements and Environmental Context

An in-depth analysis of the four paintings reveals that backdrop detailing is not solely ornamental but an interpretive choice that modifies the drama's cosmic magnitude. Each textual lineage constructs its distinct form of landscape-as-narrative, transitioning from the immediate to the universally

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applicable while advancing the story.

The Akbari tradition specifically adorns its images with layers of rock, tangled timber, and swirling clouds that appear as though they had been meticulously imprinted onto the parchment. The texture and tone fulfil dual functions: the tumultuous sky suggests hidden celestial operations while simultaneously providing an effective backdrop for the conflict beneath. The natural elements illustrated in the Akbari manuscripts—trees, cliffs, canals, and vast skies—are portrayed with a dual emphasis on their ordinary appearance and their deep, often spiritual meaning. The chaotic environment illustrates the significant weight of the conflicts it contains and easily offers backdrops for extraordinary occurrences that challenge established scientific principles. This image reveals a background replete with rich graphic features. This background features diagonal, rhythmic layers ascending from the bottom, alongside swirling mountains that, in ancient Persian miniatures, are derived from Chinese traditions.

In contrast, the Freer copy prefers unembellished vistas composed of softly contoured hills and wisps of cloud traversing predominantly level terrain. The economy of the location directs focus to the central action while yet providing viewers with a general feeling of distance and spatial context. The structures function as unseen threads, organising the narrative into coherent pieces and establishing a hierarchical order that draws on Persian book design while accommodating Hindu narratives. The removal of background noise preserves the page's readability and dignity, precisely what courtiers anticipated when commissioning such opulent volumes.The Freer copy adorns its clouds, sky, and indistinct horizon with deliberate decorative patterns rather than true depictions of weather; this arranged design operates similarly to a kirtle, enriching the overall composition and subtly suggesting the existence of cosmic entities within the narrative. This approach exemplifies the Persian inclination to substitute literal reality with symbolic representation, emphasising design above visual precision in particular aspects.

The Shangri copy depicts a scene on a flat olive-green field, marked solely by evenly spaced tufts of stylised grass that direct the battle's progression, all enclosed by a striking red-and-yellow border that acts as a decorative proscenium, topped with a scalloped white-and-indigo band that merges sky and earth into a single plane. The absence of trees, boulders, or building remnants precludes the geographical localisation of Lanka; instead, undulating, smoke-like lines emanating from the serpent-noose serve as the singular environmental indicator, delineating the site of magical activity rather than a natural ambiance. This intentional simplification of the surroundings into rhythmic patterns and symbolic themes exemplifies the Rajput "conceptual view," wherein the environment is prioritised for narrative clarity rather than spatial realism (Poddar, 2008, pp. 70–72; Losty, 2008, pp. 16, 74).

The Mewar rendition simplifies the scene to a uniform olive-green surface, marked solely by regularly spaced diagonal tufts of stylised grass that subtly indicate the battlefield's extent, all enclosed within a vibrant red-and-yellow border that serves as a proscenium framing the action (Poddar, 2008, pp. 70–71). The absence of a horizon line or architectural indicators results in a seamless blend of earth and sky, while delicate, spiralling lines emanating from intertwined figures signify magical energy rather than a natural atmosphere (Losty, 2008, pp. 16, 74). Sahib Din simplifies the surroundings to rhythmic plant patterns and ornamental borders, embodying the Rajput "conceptual approach," prioritising narrative clarity and cosmic resonance over spatial realism.

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Interregional Portrayals of the Nāgapāśa Episode in South Asian Rāmāyaṇa Manuscripts

The *Nāgapāśa* episode highlights divine vulnerability, encouraging artists to depict heavenly suffering while maintaining unwavering faith. The intertwined serpent-noose symbolizes māyā—its elegant curl hiding hidden chaos—and prompts viewers to reflect on the nature of restriction. Even as Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa lie bound, their halos and calm expressions emphasize the persistence of dharma beyond temporary defeat. Visually, the winding rope contrasts with the heroes' solid forms, representing the tension between illusion and lasting divine order within the larger cosmic cycle of creation and renewal.

Across courts and monasteries, the *Nāgapāśa* story served as both a moral lesson and ritual focus. Palm-leaf manuscripts, wall scrolls, and temple paintings guided devotees in meditation on dharma's victory over adharma. In Akbar's workshop, Mughal miniature painters blended Persian brushwork with Hindu iconography, creating the Freer *Rāmāyaṇa* that appealed to both Muslim and Hindu audiences and subtly promoted imperial tolerance. In contrast, Shangri workshops favored clarity and symmetry—bold outlines and simple color schemes encouraged silent contemplation—while the huge Mewar codex, filled with vivid reds and golds, turned each page into a ceremonial rallying point for Rajput lineage and devotion.

Despite regional differences, all four manuscript traditions show strong consistency in adapting sacred stories to changing political and spiritual environments. Mughal-Persian pages combine Isfahan's floral designs with Sanskrit rhythms, forming a visual "bilingualism" understood by various courts. Himalayan artists, free from court politics, chose simplicity—earthy hues and restrained gold—to support monastic study and village worship. In Mewar, luxurious volumes declared Hindu sovereignty under Mughal rule, their grand size and rich colors signaling both temple allegiance and royal authority as a single ritual object.
Together, these manuscripts chart an art-historical map of visual diplomacy, where each workshop preserved its unique style while respecting Vālmīki's central story. The serpent-noose symbol consistently dramatizes danger as a prelude to liberation, inviting intellectual and emotional involvement across cultures. By combining Mughal naturalism, Himalayan formality, and Rajput exuberance, the *Rāmāyaṇa* manuscripts show how artistic innovation and tradition coexisted under diverse patrons—from imperial courts to mountain monasteries—driven by a shared dedication to narrating divine victory.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of four *Nāgapāśa* illustrations—from Akbar's Persian *Rāmāyaṇa* and Abd-al-Rahīm's Freer volume to the Shangri replica and the early Mewar codex—demonstrates the remarkable adaptability and ingenuity of South Asian artists operating under diverse patrons and regional devotional traditions. Mughal painters, faced with the task of illustrating Rāma's transient defeat while preserving his sanctity, amalgamated Persian brush techniques with Hindu iconography for political and spiritual ends; Himalayan miniaturists employed simplified compositions and subdued palettes to promote concentrated meditation; and Rajput workshops utilised vibrant reds, metallic greens, and expansive layouts to assert regional authority. Notwithstanding these stylistic variations, fundamental iconographic elements—the coiling serpent-noose, the balanced yet humbled brothers, and the celestial backdrop—persist, indicating a common reservoir of religious memory. Divergences in visual hierarchy and spatial organization—from the Mughal inclination for intricate

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narratives to Pahari moderation and Rajput vivacity—demonstrate how each tradition revered Vālmīki's epic while preserving its distinct philosophical and aesthetic values. Moreover, intentional selections of pigment gloss, matte finishes, and surface burnish reflect a sophisticated comprehension of the impact of colour and texture on devotional experiences, while foreign techniques—such as carpet motifs, oil glazes, and print-inspired layouts—were adeptly integrated into local ritual contexts. The *Nāgapāśa* scene—Rāma's abrupt decline and rapid salvation—provides a compelling lens to examine the equilibrium between continuity and innovation in Hindu visual culture. The four unique graphic styles demonstrate remarkable technical proficiency, with their striking compositions and vibrant inks continuing to captivate contemporary audiences through the epic's moral complexity. This work establishes a basis for subsequent research: comparative analysis of gutter sketches in Ahmadnagar or Chandraketugarh, investigations of alternate climax situations, and an extension of the sample methodology to Jain, Buddhist, or Persian manuscript traditions. The codices presented here constitute a minor segment of the extensive early modern *Rāmāyaṇa* collection; however, their portable pages exemplify how craft traditions elucidate cultural adaptation long after their original audiences have vanished, demonstrating that the amalgamation of spiritual authenticity and visual innovation persists in shaping discussions on belief and aesthetics throughout South Asia.

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Appendix A. Glossary of Transliterated Terms (with English Examples)

IAST	Plain ASCII	Pronunciation	Example (English word)
Aṅgada	Angada	aṅ-ga-da	**sing** (ŋ)
Faḍl	Fadl	fa-ḍl	**dog** (d)
Hanumān	Hanuman	ha-nu-mān	**food** (uː)
Indrajīt	Indrajit	in-dra-jīt	**machine** (iː)

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IAST	Plain ASCII	Pronunciation	Example (English word)
Jambavān	Jambavan	jam-ba-vān	**father** (ɑː)
Khān	Khan	khān	**father** (ɑː)
Khānān	Khanan	khā-nān	**father** (ɑː)
Lakṣmaṇa	Lakshmana	lak-ṣma-ṇa	**ship** (ʃ)
Laṅkā	Lanka	laṅ-kā	**sing** (ŋ)
Laṅkāpura	Lankapura	laṅ-kā-pu-ra	**sing** (ŋ)
Meghanāda	Meghanada	me-gha-nā-da	**father** (ɑː)
Nāgapāśa	Nagapasha	nā-ga-pā-śa	**father** (ɑː)
Raḥīm / Rahīm	Rahim	ra-ḥīm	**hat** (h)
Rāmāyaṇa	Ramayana	rā-mā-ya-ṇa	**father** (ɑː)
Rāma	Rama	rā-ma	**father** (ɑː)
Rāvaṇa	Ravana	rā-va-ṇa	**father** (ɑː)
Sugrīva	Sugriva	su-grī-va	**machine** (iː)
Sāhibdīn	Sahibdin	sā-hib-dīn	**father** (ɑː)
Viṣṇu	Vishnu	vi-ṣṇu	**ship** (ʃ)
Vālmīki	Valmiki	vā-lmī-ki	**machine** (iː)
kāṇḍa	kanda	kā-ṇḍa	**father** (ɑː)
māyā	maya	mā-yā	**father** (ɑː)

Note:
The examples highlight one key diacritic sound in each term (e.g. long vowels ā → "father," retroflex/ś → "ship," velar nasal ṅ → "sing," long ī → "machine," etc.).