



Fig.5.1 : Young Raja Udai Singh, Chamba, c.1690, gum tempera on paper, 19.05 x 13.335 cm
Allahabad Museum, Acc. No. AM-MIN-876, Photo Courtesy: Allahabad Museum

A Life in Portraits: Raja Udai Singh of Chamba (r. 1690 - 1720)

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Since the first quarter of the 17th century, the Pahari hill-states have had a tradition of court portraiture, with Raja Jagat Singh Pathania of Nurpur (r. 1618-1646) being the first Pahari chieftain to have his likeness recorded. The tradition expanded fast to neighbouring hill states, particularly Mandi, Basohli, Guler and Chamba, where art-loving Rajas expressed a wish to have their likeness preserved. In most cases, as with Basohli, the images, highly stylized and idealised, reveal little more than the royal patron's personal characteristics, likenesses set according to canonical *lakshanas*. Exceptions do exist, however, in which the intimate bond between the patron and the painter is conveyed through masterful recordings of the Rajas engaging themselves in the most private of acts. Raja Balwant Singh of Jasrota, Raja Sidh Sen and Raja Shamsher Sen of Mandi, and Raja Chattar Singh of Chamba are all examples of patrons who were portrayed, in many instances, in the most eccentric of situations. Portraiture became a potent medium through which royal patrons could demonstrate their authority and importance, morality, riches, taste, and religious preferences.

The personality of Raja Udai Singh of Chamba (r. 1690-1720) is significant because he is the only 17th-century Pahari Raja whose likeness was documented consistently from an early age onwards. He virtually became the youngest patron of Pahari painting when he ascended the Chamba throne in 1690 as a minor. A selection of portraits of Udai Singh, from his adolescence to his youth to his assassination in 1720, would demonstrate not only the evolution of the Raja's appearance, but also the various stages in the development of Chamba painting during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The evolution of his physical characteristics from childhood to the end of his life also reflects Udai Singh's decline from a popular and idolized Raja to a self-indulgent and hedonistic king. Since the portraits' dynamism is inextricably related to his private life, it is critical to study both the portraits and his personality concurrently.

The precise year of Udai Singh's birth is unclear. The Chamba *vamsavali*, the primary source for the state's political history, rarely mentions the year of the birth of Rajas. Also, no copperplate commemorating Udai Singh's birth has yet been discovered. The only information about Udai Singh's age that exists is his position as a minor at the time of his ascension. According to the Chamba *vamsavali*, Udai Singh was a minor at the time of his coronation in 1690 and Jai Singh, his father Chattar Singh's younger brother, became his regent and served as the vizier until his demise in 1696.¹ Udai Singh would have been an adult and did not require another regent following Jai Singh's death in 1696. As a result, his age at the time of his ascension would have been at least twelve, allowing us to place his tentative year of birth at 1678.

Udai Singh's first portrait honouring his coronation is in the collection of the Allahabad Museum, Fig.5.1. Although the image lacks an inscription identifying the person, there exist several reasons to attribute the portrait to the young Raja. The facial types, representation of the shrubby



Fig.5.2 : Raja Udai Singh smoking a hookah, Chamba, c.1700, gum tempera on paper, Provenance Unknown, *Photo Courtesy: Vijay Sharma*



Fig.5.3 : Raja Udai Singh smoking a hookah, Chamba, c.1700, gum tempera, gold, and silver on paper, Provenance Unknown, *Photo Courtesy: Vijay Sharma*



Fig.5.4 : Raja Udai Singh smoking a hookah, Chamba, c.1710, gum tempera, gold, and silver on paper, National Museum, *Photo Courtesy: Vijay Sharma*



Fig.5.5 : Raja Udai Singh pouring wine from a decanter, Chamba, c.1720, gum tempera, gold, and silver on paper, 25.71 x 16.19 cm, Chazen Museum, Acc. No. 2005.1.21, *Photo Courtesy: Chazen Museum*

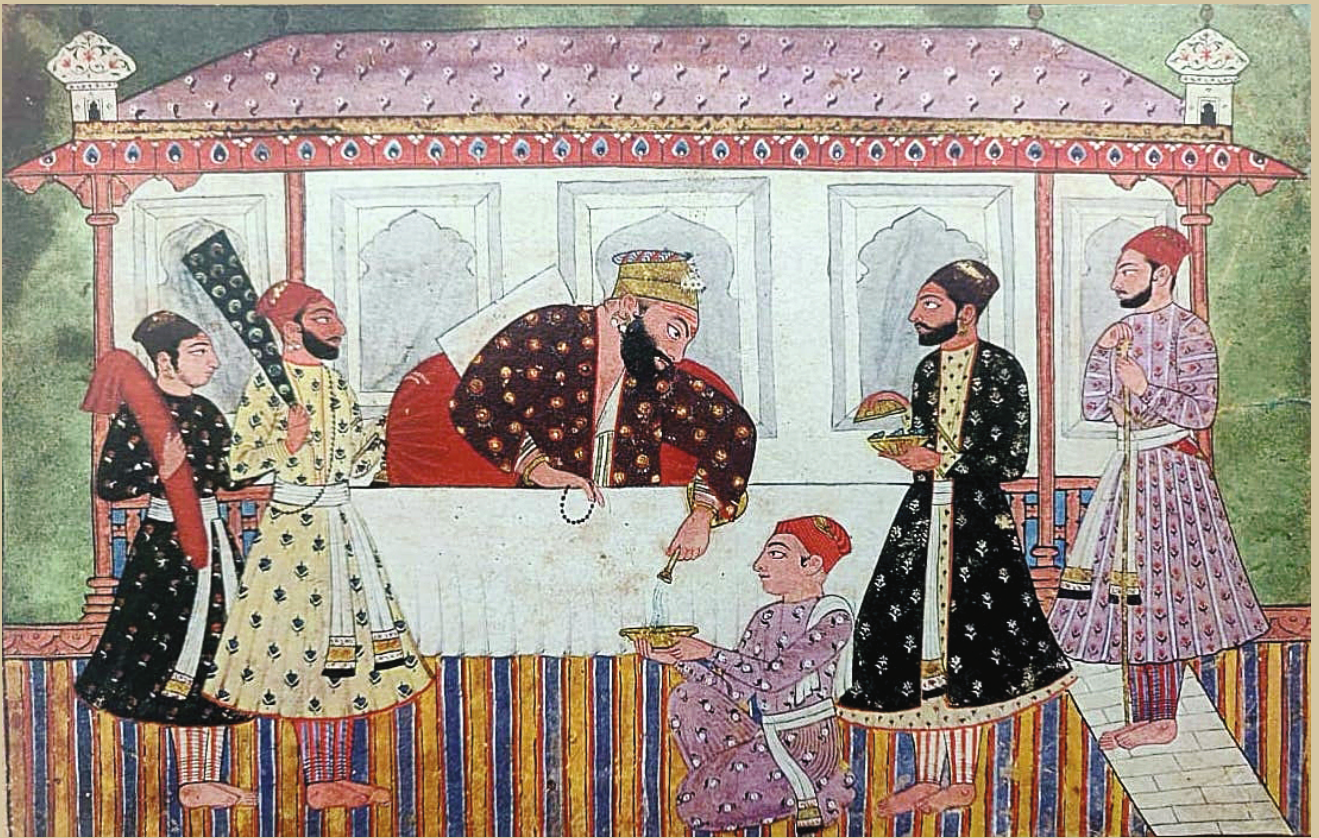


Fig.5.6 : Raja Chattar Singh of Chamba pouring wine from a decanter, Chamba, c.1685, gum tempera gold and silver on paper, 17.6 x 24.8 cm, National Museum, *Photo Courtesy: Vijay Sharma*

ground, monochromatic green background and the courtly apparel, all adhere to the painting style popular in Chamba during the reign of Raja Chattar Singh (r.1664-1690).² The peacock-tail flywhisk (*morchal*) is symbolic of the minor's regal status, while the attendant can be recognised as Jai Singh on the basis of physical characteristics represented in his other known portraits. Jai Singh's grasping of the peacock-tail flywhisk symbolizes his dual role as vizier and regent of young Udai Singh. This could be Udai Singh's first likeness after ascending to the throne. The diminutive ruler stands erect, his belt tucked with a dagger and his right hand resting on a sword. Additionally, the Raja wears amulets to ward off the evil eye, as is customary among children in Chamba. The painting does reveal the presence of painters at the courtly workshop who chose to continue with the style of Chattar Singh era.

Udai Singh's reign was noted for its economic success and political stability, which resulted in a vast and satisfied state. The populace adored the young monarch who was widely acclaimed for his religious values. Jai Singh died, leaving the state in the hands of the eighteen-year-old Udai Singh.³ In the years to follow, the Raja began to neglect his responsibilities to the state in favour of sensual pleasures, alienating himself from the masses.⁴ Raja's tenacity and resolution towards his subjects appear to have been a product of Jai Singh's supervision and latter's demise resulted in the loss of regulatory control over Udai Singh, ushering in an era of decadence and moral transgression. This is reinforced by a portrait datable to 1695-1700, Fig.5.2, presenting Udai Singh as a tall and hefty youth. The young Raja's recently acquired penchant for smoking is evident by the hookah pipe in his hand. His pouch-belly reveals his drinking habits and lack of physical activity as well. This marks the beginning of the Raja's spiral into self-indulgence and wickedness that claimed his life in less than two decades. The Raja, whose long side-locks indicate that he has not yet attained maturity, sits confidently against a towering bolster with his lips about to touch a hookah-pipe. This drawing is comparable to another contemporary portrait, Fig.5.3. The Raja, not older than twenty years, holds the hookah-pipe in one hand and a silken handkerchief in the other, similar to the previous drawing. He also appears to be clad in the same *jama* with shrub pattern as in Fig.5.2. The burnt-umber backdrop and bleeding sky are typical of Chamba painting produced between 1690 and 1700. Additionally, Udai Singh is accompanied by two youthful attendants. While one of them holds a peacock-tail flywhisk behind the Raja, the other is tasked with filling the hookah, as shown by a pair of tongs lying at his side on the floor-spread. The sectarian mark on Raja's forehead would lead one to identify him as the worshipper of Devi.

A fourth image of Raja Udai Singh as an older Raja, housed in the National Museum in New Delhi, Fig.5.4, glorified his kingly status, the clean-shaven chieftain shown in bigger proportion compared to his servants. At the upper border, an inscription in bold *takri* names him as Udai Singh. The style of the picture is akin to that of the "Horizontal *Bhagavata Purana*" series from Mankot. This is a typical Pahari portrait with little to contribute except to indicate Udai Singh's maturation from adolescence to a grown-up man, Fig.5.3. Our curiosity is piqued, however, by the portrait in the Chazen Museum, Fig.5.5, which appears to be painted in the final decade of Udai Singh's life and delineates him in his late thirties, pouring wine from a decanter into a bowl held devotionally by a noble. Unlike his previous incarnations, the Raja has developed bags under his eye, possesses a darker complexion, supports a scruffy beard, and appears to be in failing health. The subject was extremely popular during Raja Chattar Singh's reign and one of the many depictions shows him wearing an unbuttoned robe and



Fig.5.7 : Raja Udai Singh holding a falcon, Chamba, c.1720, gum tempera on paper
Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, Acc. No. 2744
Photo Courtesy: Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh



Fig.5.8 : Memorial Plaque of Udai Singh, Raja Udai Singh temple, Chamba, c.1720, sandstone, 56.4 x 42.8 cm, *Photo Courtesy: Sarang Sharma*

pouring wine from a bottle into a container held by an attendant, Fig.5.6. As implied by the costume he is wearing, the attendant appears to be a man of aristocratic standing and some prominence. He could be Mian Lakshman Singh, the younger brother and vizier of Udai Singh.

Udai Singh's public and private life were turbulent during late 1720s. The Raja had maintained a harem of women, marrying as many as twenty-two Ranis during his lifetime, the last of whom was a 'low-born' woman'.⁵ To the mortification of his court, the Raja appointed her father, a barber by trade, as the vizier. Finally, in the court, a plot was devised to assassinate Udai Singh and establish Mian Lakshman Singh on the Chamba *gaddi*.⁶ Initially, Lakshman Singh had joined the conspirators who fixed up for Udai Singh a date for a hunting expedition on the left bank of river Ravi, present-day Udaipur, five kilometres away from Chamba. When Udai Singh realized he is in danger, he came out of his tent with sword held aloft in hand and crying for help. Lakshman Singh, moved by his brother's appeal, changed his mind, and joined the fight against the conspirators. The officials then ordered Lakshman Singh to be slain first, followed by Udai Singh. As has been recorded, Udai Singh died after a few days.⁷

The Government Museum and Art Gallery in Chandigarh houses the final known portrait of Raja Udai Singh, Fig.5.7. The Raja is pictured holding a falcon in his right arm, dressed in a green robe with a fur-trimmed collar. The Raja is identified as "*raja udaisingh-chambavala*" in a Persian inscription at the top. His eyes are drooping, his jaw is malformed, and his shoulders are slanted. Although the Raja is obese, a condition he has struggled with since childhood, this painted image is in stark contrast to his earlier portraits, full of charm and regal splendour.

Udai Singh's ghost was claimed to haunt the Chamba palace, creating much problems for his successor, Raja Ugar Singh (r.1720-1735). The latter built a temple near the site of murder, far away from the palace, to bury the bad spirit.⁸ A tax in the name of Raja Udai Singh, called "*tirsera-udaisinghiana-autariana*" was collected till Chamba became part of the Indian Republic. A memorial stone of the Raja is kept at the temple, depicting him along with his twenty-two Ranis, Fig.5.8.

A significant aspect that emerges from the study of Raja Udai Singh's six portraits is that each portrait is painted in a distinct style, revealing to us the presence of more than one artists' guild active at Chamba during early 18th century. Contrary to other schools of Pahari painting noted for their individual stylistic qualities, by no capacities of our mind could we define a specific "Chamba style". A re-examination of the artistic evolution of the many Pahari schools in the early 18th century could thus reveal to us more insights regarding the nature of patronage, migration of artists, and attribution of major sets of miniatures to several master painters.

References

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3. Hutchison and Vogel, *op.cit.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p.311.
8. *Ibid.*