



The art of Chamba got a specific dimension in the 18th century when Umed Singh (r.1748-1764 CE) became the ruler.¹ A definite impetus was given to the promotion of art and culture in his regime. He gave patronage to the Mughal artists who fled from the troubled capital and this continued even in the regime of his successor Raj Singh (1764-1794 CE).² This was the period when the local style of folk art of embroidery took a sophisticated turn and emerged as a courtly art form.³ The successive rulers of the Chamba dynasty, Raja Jit Singh (r.1794-1808 CE), Raja Charat Singh (r.1808-1844 CE) and Raja Sri Singh (r.1844-1870 CE) also patronized this art and during this era the tradition of embroidery got more refined.⁴ Most of the specimens available today belong to their regimes.

The Chamba *rumals* have depiction of the Krishna myth as a constant theme. These embroideries have the *Rasamandala*, in both folk and classical styles. Other popular themes included the birth of Krishna, his playful interactions with the *gopis*, his subjugation of demons and his youthful mischief's. The embroiderers also drew inspiration from the Krishna-Rukmini saga and the story of *Rukmini-harana* particularly interested the artists. The handkerchiefs often feature symbols of Lord Vishnu, which may be due to the strong influence of the Vaishnava sect in the Chamba region during the 17th-18th centuries.

It is uncertain when *Vaishnavism* came to the Hill States but there is much evidence that along with the pre-existing *Shaivism*, Chamba emerged as a centre of the Vaishnava sect in the medieval period.⁵ It has six stone temples arranged in a row from north to south. Out of these, three are dedicated to Lord Vishnu and three to Lord Shiva,⁶ showing the dominance of *Vaishnavism* in Chamba. An important temple in the north of Chamba is that of Lord Lakshmi-Narayana or Lakshminatha, said to be built by King Sahillavarman in the 10th century.⁷ According to an inscription found in Chamba, a Vishnu temple popularly known as Hari Rai temple near the Chaugan gate was built in the second-half of the 11th century by King Lakshmana Varman, a ruler from the Varman dynasty. Many other inscriptions reveal the devotion towards Lord Krishna by the rulers of Chamba.⁸ Indubitably, the credit for the expansion of the Krishna theme on the Chamba *rumal* goes to the women of the royal and elite families of Chamba,⁹ who played a vital role in the extensive depiction of the Krishna theme on these *rumal*. The painters working in the royal studio drew the subjects related to Krishna theme with

◀ Fig.10.1 : Incidents of Krishna's Life Chamba, Himachal Pradesh 19th century, double satin stitch embroidery on fine muslin cloth floss silk and silver-gilt strip (*badla*) 77x140cm, acquired from Radhakrishna Bharany Bhart Kala Bhavan Varanasi, Acc. No. 10/239

great skill, in a classical style visible in the contemporary Chamba painting.¹⁰

Bharat Kala Bhavan (BKB) Museum of Varanasi has an excellent collection of Chamba *rumals* executed in both, folk and classical styles. There are beautiful *thapad* and *rumals* related to *Rasamandala*, Shri Krishna with *gopis*, Radha-Krishna, Rukmini-marriage, Vishnu-worship, etc. Among all these, an extraordinary *rumal*, Fig.10.1, with the depiction of Krishna *lila* is especially noteworthy. It depicts an amazing compilation of themes related to Lord Krishna arranged in twelve panels. A broad border of floral motifs encircle these panels which are arranged in two opposite lines of six on one side, giving an impression of a mirror repeat. The *mehrab*-shaped panels have the gaps filled with floral motifs, creating symmetry between the panels. Each panel has a particular scene from Lord Krishna's life and a representation of Vishnu on Garuda.

i. Krishna Stealing Butter (*Makhan Chori*)

This panel depicts *Makhan-chori*, the most famous exploit of Krishna's childhood. It narrates a story from *Shrimadbhagavata Purana*. According to this story, child Krishna used to steal butter and curd from the houses in Gokula with his brother Balarama and friends Shridama and Subala. One milkmaid named Prabhavati complained about this to his mother. Mother Yashoda reprimanded Krishna for this act and assured her that this wouldn't happen again. But Krishna secretly enters Prabhavati's house again with his friends. This butter theft scene has been beautifully depicted in the panel. It shows a butter-pot hanging at a great height in a basket made with ropes. But the clever Krishna climbed a mortar to steal the butter. He is depicted with one hand in the pot and giving butter to his friends from the other. A monkey holding the mortar is also in the scene. The milkmaid Prabhavati is standing stunned at all this. Shri Krishna and the *gopas* are wearing conical caps and striped patterned rustic costumes with scarves tied around their waists while Krishna is adorned with jewellery. The jumping posture of child Krishna and his friends adds liveliness to the scene. The pot of butter is hanging in an arched building with a peacock sitting behind a domed tower on one side.

ii. The Divine Dance of Krishna

The scene depicted in this panel is a commonly used illustration in the religious scriptures *Bhagavata Purana* and *Gita-Govinda*. Śhri Krishna is shown dancing blissfully with raised hands. He is holding his flute in his right hand. Radha has been depicted playing a striped patterned *mridanga* on his right whereas her companion is shown with *manjira* on his left side. The artist has successfully tried to bring the scene to life by showing the *patka* (sash) fluttering in the air with the rhythm of the dance. Krishna is adorned with jewellery including a *kirita-mukuta* (crown) on his head, bangles on his wrists, armlets on his arms, anklets on his feet and an attractive necklace around his neck. Notably, a similar composition can be seen in the depiction of *Raga Vasanta* in the *Ragamala* series of paintings belonging to Guler-Kangra tradition.

iii. Yashoda Shows Krishna the Moon in the Water

This panel has an incident based on the stories of Krishna's childhood. Though the incident is not mentioned in the *Bhagavata Purana* or *Harivamsha Purana*, it has a mention in certain medieval works, prominent among which is *Surasagara* by Suradasa (16th century).¹¹ According to the narrative, one night while watching the moon in the sky, Krishna asked his father about it, to which Nanda told him that it is the moon, the toy of Gods. As soon as Krishna heard the word toy, he insisted on getting it. He became very agitated and was not ready to listen to anything. Mother Yashoda tried to pacify child Krishna with other toys, but all her efforts were unsuccessful. Then Yashoda used a plate filled with water to reflect the moon.

The panel with this story has two consequential incidents in one scene. In the first scene, child Krishna is sitting on the shoulder of his father and demanding to give him the toy while pointing at the moon. Nanda is trying to amuse him by showing a replica of the moon. The second scene is a consequence of this demand where Mother Yashoda is trying to cool him down by showing the reflection of the moon in the water filled in a big round platter. The most interesting part is that Yashoda is holding him with her hand, as Krishna, wearing a red tunic, is trying to touch the moon. In the background of the scene, a group of trees has been made on the right side in which the stars along with the moon are visible in the sky. A pair of stork birds has been depicted on the left side in its foreground.

iv. Redemption of Yamalarjuna, Fig.10.3

The panel, Fig.10.3, illustrates an event from *Bhagavata Purana* preceding the salvation of Kuvera's cursed sons by child Krishna. One day, while Yashoda was busy churning curd, Krishna came to her and started demanding butter from the pot. He broke the pot by pelting a stone when she refused to meet his demand. Yashoda got irritated and decided to punish him. She found him after much effort and decided to tie him to a mortar to punish him and prevent him from doing any mischief again. However, Yashoda became very upset, as the rope she had to tie him was shorter than needed. Seeing his mother's distress, Krishna stopped resisting and quietly allowed her to tie him to the mortar, but as his mother left, he dragged the mortar to the bank of Yamuna. There were two huge *arjuna* trees at the bank of river. The mortar got stuck between two big trees. Although Krishna had his way through the gap between the trees, he could not drag the mortar with him as it got stuck horizontally between them. Krishna kept trying, and as soon as he pulled with all his strength, the trees uprooted and fell with a deafening sound. The trees transformed into two *gandharva*, who were the sons of Kuvera but turned into trees due to the curse of Sage Narada. Kuvera's sons, Nalakuvara and Manigriva flew to heaven after paying obeisance to Krishna. In the embroidered panel, Krishna is shown with one hand tied to the mortar hanging between the two trees, and with the other hand, he is trying to save himself from the blow of the stick of Mother Yashoda. Here, the *arjuna* trees are depicted densely covered with leaves and pair of peacocks and peahens at the foreground. A Kangra painting of the same theme, Fig.10.2, would present a comparative visual.

v. Cowherd Krishna

In this panel, blue Krishna is portrayed as a cowherd, taking a herd of cows for grazing with his two friends. He holds a stick in one hand to control the herd while playing the flute in the other. Both his friends are wearing rustic clothes and conical caps on their heads and hold sticks in their hands. A crescent-shaped pond filled with lyre flowers and leaves create a forest effect. A crane and flowering sprigs are arranged symmetrically on both sides.

vi. Krishna demanding Butter and Curd from the Milkmaids

The activity of the grown-up Krishna was nowhere less than the mischief's of the child Krishna. Whereas in his childhood, he used to steal curd and butter from the houses of milkmaids, one of his feats in his youth was to block the way of the milkmaids and demand butter and curd from them. This panel depicts Krishna holding the hand of a milkmaid carrying an earthen pot on her head. He is harassing her to give him some of the curd or the butter and simultaneously trying to reach the pot with his other hand. Other milkmaids are trying to save their friend by pulling her using one hand while holding the pots on their heads with the other hand. The scene has a huge tree filled with leaves in the background. Krishna in *dhoti* and *uttariya* is adorned with ornaments including a bejewelled crown.

vii. Radha offering Betel Leaf to Krishna

Radha's attempt to calm the anger of Krishna by offering him betel leaves is the subject of this panel. Krishna is standing opposite to Radha in an angry posture. An irked Krishna has placed his stick-wielding right hand on the waist and is holding the flute in his left hand. It seems that he is annoyed by something and saying it to her. Radha is standing in a surrendering posture and is trying to appease Krishna by offering *paan* from the saucer held in her hand. Krishna and Radha are standing under a tree full of flowers, with two birds sitting on the branches. A simple drawing of another woman without embroidery over it is visible behind Radha.

viii. Radha-Krishna swinging

This panel shows Radha and Krishna on a swing made of a hexagonal throne, looking lovingly at each other. Krishna is seated cross-legged while Radha is sitting on one side of the swing with folded legs. Two maids are standing on either side of the swing, holding the two pillars that support the swing. There are two lotuses carved on either side of the pillars, on which two off-white herons facing each other are carved. A similar depiction may be noticed in the *Hindola-Raga* from *Raga-Ragini* paintings from Pahari school.

ix. Vishnu

This scene is very different from other narrative panels. Here, Lord Vishnu is sitting on his ride Garuda. Interestingly, Shri Krishna is considered the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. In his four arms Vishnu holds *chakra* (discus), *shankha* (conch), *gada* (mace) and a *padma* (lotus).

Garuda is depicted in a dynamic posture with his wings extended and one leg outstretched; he is holding a snake in his hand. The foreground has a pond with lotus flowers and leaves.

x. Persisting Child

This panel illustrates Krishna's irresistible desire to get the moon. It has two such scenes in one frame. In the first scene, he insists his parents bring the moon to him. He thinks the moon is a toy and desperately tries to grab it by lifting himself on his father's shoulder. His father Nanda holds him tightly to avoid falling. In the second scene, Krishna is pointing towards the moon, with his right hand and asking Yashoda to bring it down for him. Yashoda is holding his left hand to stop him from running out and trying to calm him down. This scene has a shining crescent moon in the middle of the sky. Four birds are depicted on the left flying to the right, indicating the onset of night when the birds return to their homes. These birds have been made in different colours. It is noteworthy that Krishna is depicted in brown in both the scenes, unlike the traditional blue.

xi. Subjugation of the Serpent Kaliya (*Kaliyamardana*)

This panel has the story of *Kaliyamardana*, another courageous act of conquering the evil serpent Kaliya by Lord Krishna, one of the most popular acts of his childhood. The five-headed Serpent Kaliya had made river Kalindi his abode, and his poison was killing the animals and human beings of the village. Krishna gave relief to the villagers by conquering him and spared his life on the condition that Kaliya leaves the river and goes far away from the place.

According to the myth, Naga Kaliya, who had fled from his place fearing the bird king Garuda, made his home in a pond near the Kalindi River. The venom emanating from his many mouths had poisoned the river, resulting in the lifeless of many animals and villagers. His presence had become a life threat to the inhabitants of *Vrajavasis*. Understanding the situation, Lord Krishna made a plan to punish



Fig.10.2 : Infant Krishna tied to the mortar"
Kangra, c.1790
opaque watercolour and gold on paper
105x160 mm without border
BKB, Varanasi, Acc. No. 372

Fig.10.3 : Krishna tied to the mortar
detail of Fig.10.1

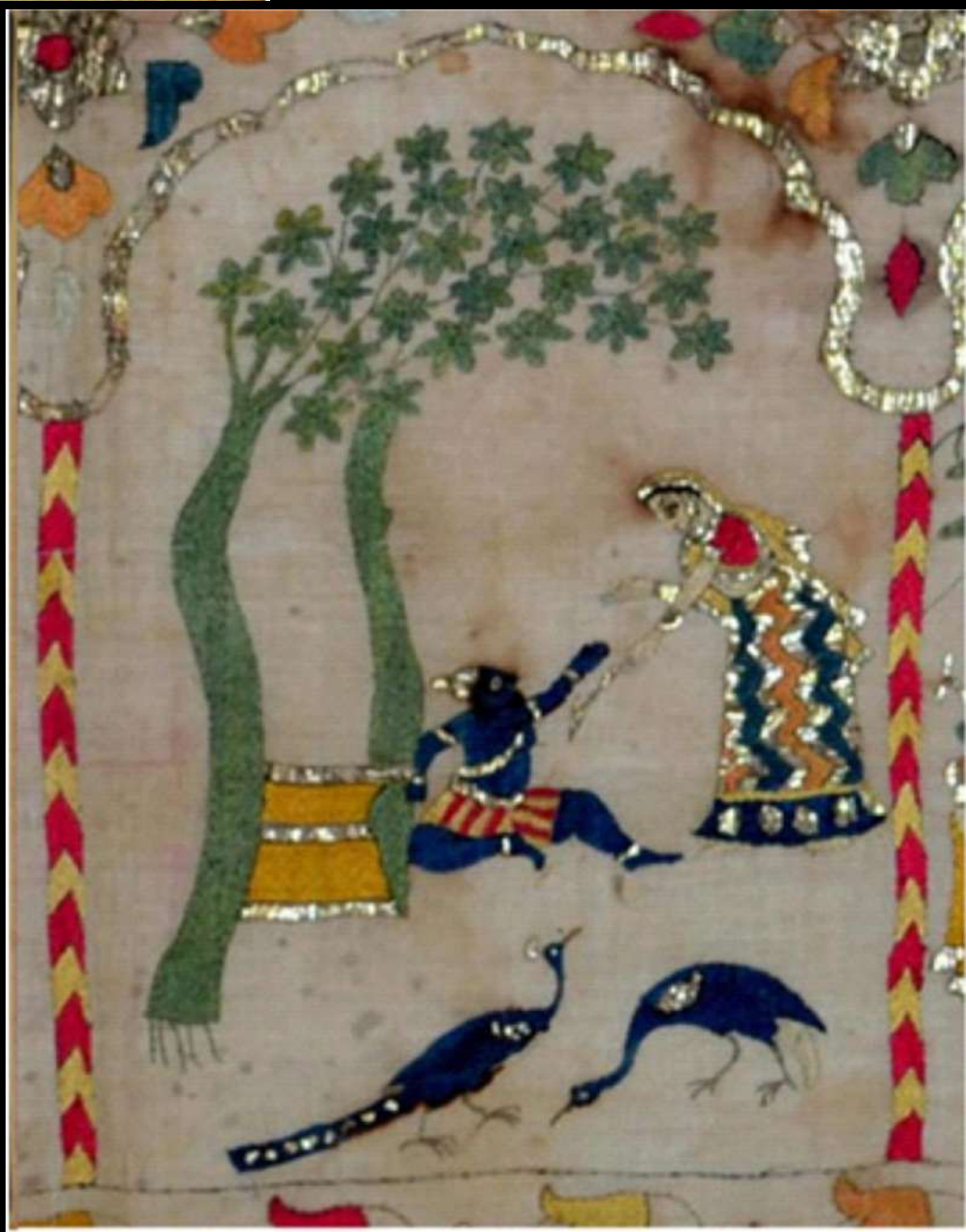


Fig.10.4 : Krishna combing Radha's hair
Rangmahal, Chamba, late 18th/early-19th century
wall panel painted in fresco secco technique



Fig.10.5 : Krishna combing Radha's hair
detail of Fig.10.1

Kaliya. He jumped down from a *kadamba* tree into the river and began to play in the water striking it with his arms. The noise created by Krishna, enraged Kaliya and the latter encircled Krishna with his coils. The people of Vraja got scared seeing this and started screaming with fear. Seeing the fearful state of the people, Lord Krishna freed himself from the hold of Kaliya and started fighting with him. The prolonged fight resulted in the weakening of the powers of Kaliya and taking this opportunity, Krishna stood on the head of the serpent and began dancing on it. This panel has this dancing scene, where Krishna is dancing on the head of Kaliya while holding a lotus bud in his right hand and a flute in his left. A fully dressed Krishna is in his conventional robe and crown with a scarf on his neck. The scarf is flurrying to give the effect of rhythmic dancing. Krishna is surrounded by two serpent-damsels, having the composite body of humans and snakes. They are pleading with Krishna to forgive Kaliya and presenting lotus flowers to please him.

xii. Krishna combing Radha's hair, Fig.10.5

The scene, Fig.10.5, is not related to any mythical story and only showcases the strong love bond between Radha and Krishna. While Radha is seated on the *diwan* with folded legs, leaning on a pillow to make the task easy, Krishna is standing behind to comb the hair. A female attendant is showing a mirror to Radha to help her see the combing process. Krishna adorns a peacock feathered crown and has a large garland of different colours of marigold flowers around his neck. Radha is wearing an orange *lehnga* (skirt), and her upper garment is of sky blue colour. She adorns armlets, wristlets, earrings, and a necklace. A landscape in the background and utensils surrounding the figures create an interesting royal setup. There is a clear imprint of one wall painting panel of *Rangmahal*, Fig.10.4, displaying a similar composition.

References

1. Bhattacharya, A.K., *Chamba Rumal*, Indian Museum, Calcutta, 1965, p.5.
2. Goetz, Herman, *Studies in the History and Art of Kashmir and the Indian Himalaya*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1969, pp.117-124; Ohri, V.C. and Khanna, A.N. (eds), *History and Culture of the Chamba State*, collected paper of seminar held at Chamba, New Delhi, 1989, p.13.
3. Handa, O.C., *Textiles, Costumes and Ornaments of the Western Himalaya*, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1998, p.126.
4. *Ibid.*, p.127.
5. Banerjee, P., *The Life of Krishna in Indian Art*, National Museum, New Delhi, 1978, p.168.
6. *Ibid.*, p.170.
7. *Ibid.*, p.127.
8. *Ibid.*, p.170.
9. Handa, O.C., 1998, p.127, Rani Shardha was a devout devotee of Krishna. It was under her patronage that a number of *rumals*, depicting various episode of the *Krishnalila*, were embroidered in Chamba.
10. *Ibid.*, p.127, The queen of Charat Singh is known to have brought some *heram*-women as a dowry-gift with her. Some of them were proficient in the art embroidery. Thus, the herm of Chamba remained hummed with the artistic activities of the ladies, who could turn out exquisite works of embroidery. Handa, O.C., 1998, p.127.
11. Banerjee, P., 1978, p.15.

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