

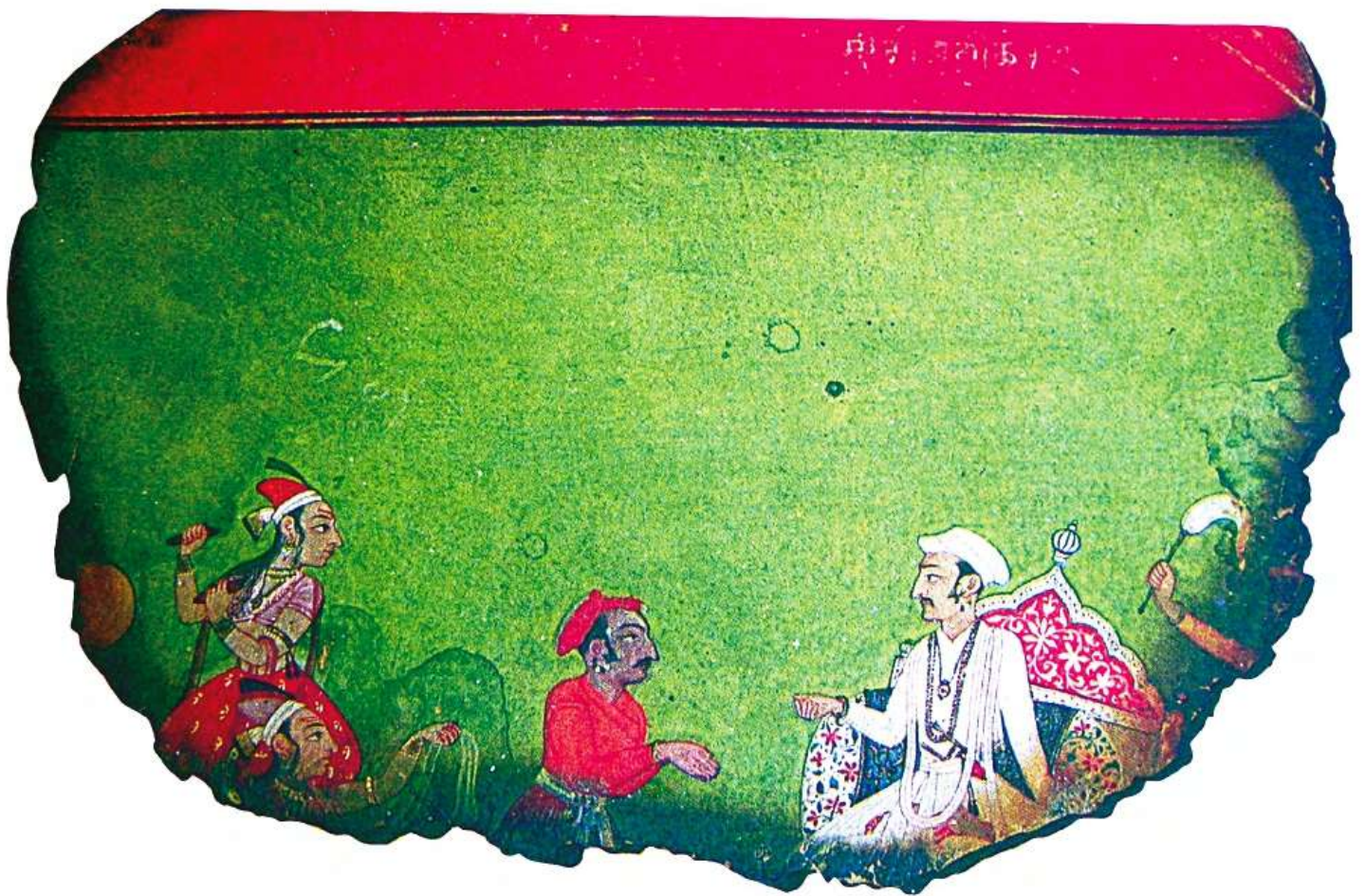


**Fig.5.2 :** Raja Jagat Singh (r.1628-1641) of Nurpur worshipping Vishnu and Lakshmi, Nurpur, 1620, opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 23 x 22.5 cm (without border), Coll. Bharat Kala Bhawan, Varanasi, Acc. No. 234

## 5 Early Paintings from Chamba : an assortment

Vijay Sharma

The perspectives of various authors on the origins and initial phase of Pahari painting are ambiguous, and there appears to be little consensus among scholars regarding the dating of the early examples, particularly those belonging to the royal atelier of Chamba. The documentary evidence for the origins of Pahari painting and its early evolution is sparse and has been interpreted inconsistently. V.C. Ohri's researches reveal that an atelier had been established in Chamba during the reign of Raja Balabhadra Varman (r.1589-1641). Ohri reproduced a contemporary portrait of Raja and his son Bishambhar and discussed at length the early painting style in Chamba, Fig.1. This surviving portrait of Raja Balabhadra Varman watching a dance performance apparently indicates the Mughal-inspired artistic expression, much in vogue at the Chamba court during the first half of the 17th century.



**Fig.5.1** : Raja Balabhadra Varman watching a dance performance, Chamba, first half of the 17th century, opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 21.5 x 11.5 cm, Coll. Himachal State Museum, Shimla

The city of Lahore in Punjab remained the capital of the Mughals during the last years of Emperor Akbar's reign until his death in 1605 CE. Being vassals of the Mughal empire, the hill-chiefs were required to visit the Mughal court and pay tribute to their overlord and, thus, became familiar with the fashions and tastes of the Mughals. Scores of painters, calligraphers, book-binders and other craftsmen were engaged in the imperial atelier. After Akbar's death, the Mughal capital was transferred from Lahore to Agra, including the imperial atelier. Jahangir had an extraordinary disposition for the art of painting and patronized only a limited number of accomplished painters in his employ. It is a recorded fact that certain Gujarati painters were active in Akbar's atelier for the production of albums and illustrated manuscripts. Beyond 1605, painters of lesser calibre were compelled to seek patronage with the nearby Hindu princes or nobles and, most probably, some of them received patronage in the princely hill states of Nurpur, Mandi, Chamba and Basohli. Eventually, these feudal territories continued as the early regional centres of Pahari painting. This apparent fact is also confirmed by the surviving contemporary portraits of the rulers of these hill states.

Because of its proximity to the Punjab plains, Nurpur Chiefs had close relationship with the Mughal emperors. Raja Basu (r.1580-1613) of Nurpur is remembered for his interest in artistic pursuits and the portrait of "Raja Bossow" appearing in a mural in the Lahore fort was mentioned by the European traveller, William Finch.<sup>1</sup> Basu's son Jagat Singh (r.1628-1641) was a favourite of the Mughals and he also served as military commander in several expeditions of the Mughal army. Possibly due to this reason, contemporary portraits of Jagat Singh display marked Mughal influence, Fig.5.2.<sup>2</sup> Since he remained occupied in the military expeditions with little time for artistic pursuits, some of his painters migrated from Nurpur to Chamba, an immediate neighbouring state with peaceful environment. Chamba was also a more prosperous state compared to that of Nurpur. The itinerant artisans, well-versed in various crafts like stone and wood carving and painting, received the generous patronage of Raja Balabhadra Varman<sup>3</sup> of Chamba, presumably in the second quarter of the 17th century.

In 1623, Jagat Singh Pathania of Nurpur attacked Chamba and treacherously killed Balabhadra's elder son Janardan Varman. Consequently, Janardan's infant son Prithvi Singh was smuggled from Chamba to Mandi by Dai Batalu, his wet nurse. There, the infant prince was brought up under the care of Raja Hari Sen (1623-1637). During Raja Jagat Singh's occupation of Chamba from 1623 to 1641, several families of hereditary artisans seem to have migrated from Nurpur to Chamba. Among these were *sunar*, goldsmiths, *chhaphare*, textile-printers and *rangrez*, dyers. Some nobles and affluent traders of Nurpur also settled down in Chamba. Accordingly, the entries of these families in the *bahi*, pilgrimage register, at Haridwar are still maintained by the Nurpur priests and not by the priests of the Chamba region.<sup>4</sup> This important fact, apparently, confirms the migration of these aristocrats and artisans from Nurpur to Chamba. Also, it is very likely that painters from Nurpur migrated and settled permanently at Chamba in search of patronage.

In 1641, young Prithvi Singh, driving out the Nurpur troops with the help of Mandi and Kullu states, regained his kingdom and established himself as Raja. He was the only prince of Chamba who visited the Mughal court nine times in his life, where he was honoured by Emperor Shahjahan<sup>5</sup>, Fig.5.3. Raja Prithvi Singh (1641-1664), having become familiar at an early age with the art of painting during his exile in Mandi, emerged as a connoisseur of arts and patronized artistic activity in Chamba. Unfortunately, very few paintings, except for a few portraits executed during his reign, have surfaced. The figures engraved on the copper pedestal of Hidimba Devi Temple at Mehla commissioned by him, however, are indicative of the figural style of Chamba painting of his reign. At the instance of Dai Batlu, Raja Prithvi Singh had erected the wooden temple of Naga at Khajjiar near Chamba. He also commissioned the embellishment of the State-Kothi of Brahmaur with splendid figural wood carvings inspired by Mughal archetypes. A wooden door acquired from the State-Kothi, Brahmaur shows young Raja Prithvi Singh, depicted twice, standing in front of Mughal Prince Dara Shikoh and Emperor Shahjahan portrayed on the facing panels, Fig.5.4. Raja Prithvi Singh caused many reforms during his regime and was succeeded by his son and successor Raja Chhatra Singh (1664-1690).<sup>6</sup>



**Fig.5.3 :** Emperor Shahjahan and Raja Prithvi Singh, Chamba, first half of the 17th century, Ex Coll. S.C. Welch

It is evident that families of Gujarati painters were active at the Chamba court during the reign of Raja Chhatra Singh. Two *tarkhan*, carpenter-painters, Nando and Dees by names, journeyed from Chamba on a visit to Haridwar in the years 1670 and 1676.<sup>7</sup> They recorded themselves in the priest's *bahi* register as "Gujarati of Manikanth", indicating that their ancestors must have migrated to Chamba at least two or three generations earlier, most probably in the first quarter of the 17th century.



**Fig.5.4** : Carved wooden door from State Kothi, Bharmour (Chamba), mid-17th century, 165 x 38 cm, Coll. Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, Acc. No. F-4

The slender body of surviving examples indicates that Chamba was a prolific centre of painting during the 17th and 18th centuries. Two devastating incidences of fire breaking out in Chamba town, in CE 1735<sup>8</sup> and 1937, caused much havoc in which large numbers of art works, including paintings, were destroyed. Many of the Chamba paintings had been dispersed as the State remained under Nurpur subjection for about two decades. Stray paintings and portraits of Chamba rulers appeared in the charred bundle of miniatures, including Fig.5.1, which survived fortunately when the house of Ram Singh Pathania, the Wazir of Nurpur was set on fire by the British troops.

In this article, I shall discuss four mid-17th century specimens of Chamba painting inspired by the Mughal idiom. A characteristic blend of Mughal and Rajput pictorial norms manifest in these miniatures could happen due to the migration of artists during the last years of Raja Balabhadra Varman's (1589-1641) reign.

### **Fig.5.5, Devi enthroned<sup>9</sup>**

***Chamba, mid-17th century***

***Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art, Hyderabad***

This significantly damaged artwork had its origin in the Chamba-based workshop of itinerant painters. The image depicts an eight-armed Devi seated underneath a golden parasol attached to the throne. Wearing diaphanous *choli* and *ghaghara*, the goddess is adorned with a crescent moon at her forehead. She rests against a large-sized bolster and wears a jewel-studded crown as often noticed in the Mughal paintings. The inky-blue sky is broken by white colour in the monochromatic background of sap green. A brief *Takri* inscription below the *chhatra*, parasol, reads *Jalpa*, an iconic form of the Devi held in high reverence in Chamba. The arms of the Goddess are slim and smaller in comparison to her torso, whereas the wrists are conspicuously narrow. Many such stylistic elements reappeared in the Basohli paintings datable to the last quarter of the 17th century.

### **Fig.5.6, Devi adored by a Prince<sup>10</sup>**

***Chamba, mid-17th century***

***Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery***

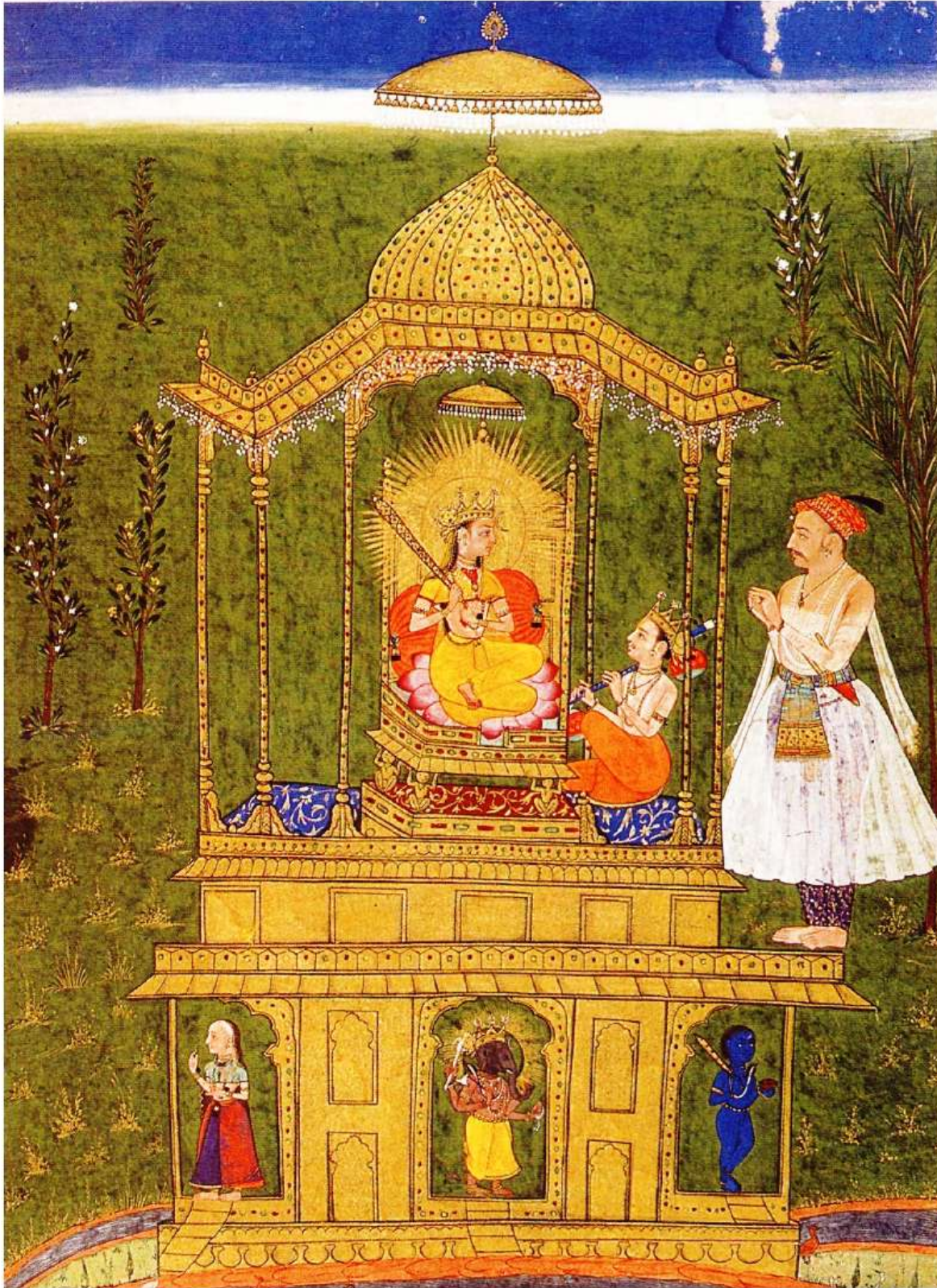
Against a green-hued open expanse speckled with plants and golden tufts rises a two-storey golden pavilion studded with precious gems. Underneath the dome, a Goddess leans on a large-size bolster on a lotus cushion. The high throne remains supported by dwarf figures of *bhara-vahakas* with their hands raised. She is dressed in yellow garments and her crown is decorated with a crescent moon, embellishing her forehead. The effulgence of a sparkling golden halo with pointed rays adds dimension to the deity's otherwise stunning visage.

Narada, the celestial sage, sits at the feet of the Devi chanting in praise of the Great Goddess on *rudra-vina*, his double gourd musical instrument, within the columned pavilion. The figure of a royal personage facing the Goddess with his folded hands in obeisance can be identified by the plume tucked in his red turban. He is dressed in a diaphanous white *jama* fastened with a green sash that conceals a dagger emblematic of his royal title. The aristocrat depicted here, in all likelihood, is Prince Janardan Varman, the son of Raja Balabhadra Varman, who had been seeing the affairs of the Chamba kingdom as a regent.

In the lower storey of the pavilion, divided into three panels, appears the standing figure of Ganesha at the centre, flanked by a blue-complexioned young Bhairava holding a mace and a cup full of liquor, and

an elderly lady with grey hair wearing a red skirt. Possibly the latter is Dai Batalu, the devout wet-nurse of Prithvi Singh. In Chamba chronicle, she continued as a prominent person who had saved the life of young Prithvi Singh by smuggling him safely out of Chamba to Mandi state.

This painting has strong stylistic affinities with Fig.5.5, Devi enthroned. The treatment of a rivulet shown at the foreground is invariably noticed in early Mandi-Chamba paintings. Wearing a yellow dhoti and carrying his usual attributes, Ganesha sports a golden crown and a crescent. A snake curls around his neck and a girdle of golden bells encircles his waist. The radiating nimbus, a recurrent motif in Figs.5.7 & 5.8, enhance the divine presence of the deity.



**Fig.5.6** : The Devi adored by a prince, Chamba, mid - 17th century, opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 24.5 x 17.5 cm, Coll. Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery



**Fig.5.5 :** *The Devi Enthroned, Chamba, mid-17th century, opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 17.3 x 12.5 cm, Coll. Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art, Hyderabad*

**Fig.5.7, Krishna Raising Mount Govardhana<sup>11</sup>**

**Chamba, mid-17th century**

**N.C. Mehta Collection, L.D. Museum, Ahmedabad**

Composed in a vertical format, this painting depicts Krishna standing on a small podium using his little finger to raise Mount Govardhana. He is dressed in a yellow dhoti with a girdle of golden bells around his waist. A knee-length garland, *vaijayantimala*, and an orange scarf, *uttariya*, fluttering on either side, are other notable features.

Krishna's crowned head, surrounded by a golden halo with pointed rays, has been depicted slightly bowed downward to exchange glances with Radha against a monochromatic sage-green background. A bearded figure wearing a *Shahjahani* turban stands beside her. He is none other than Nanda, Krishna's foster father. Balarama, Krishna's elder brother, stands on the other side, engaged in elevating the mountain with a long staff. In the foreground, a herd of typical "Pahari cows" can be seen sheltering beneath Mount Govardhana.

**Fig.5.8, Vishnu and Lakshmi seated on Garuda<sup>12</sup>**

**Chamba, mid-17th century**

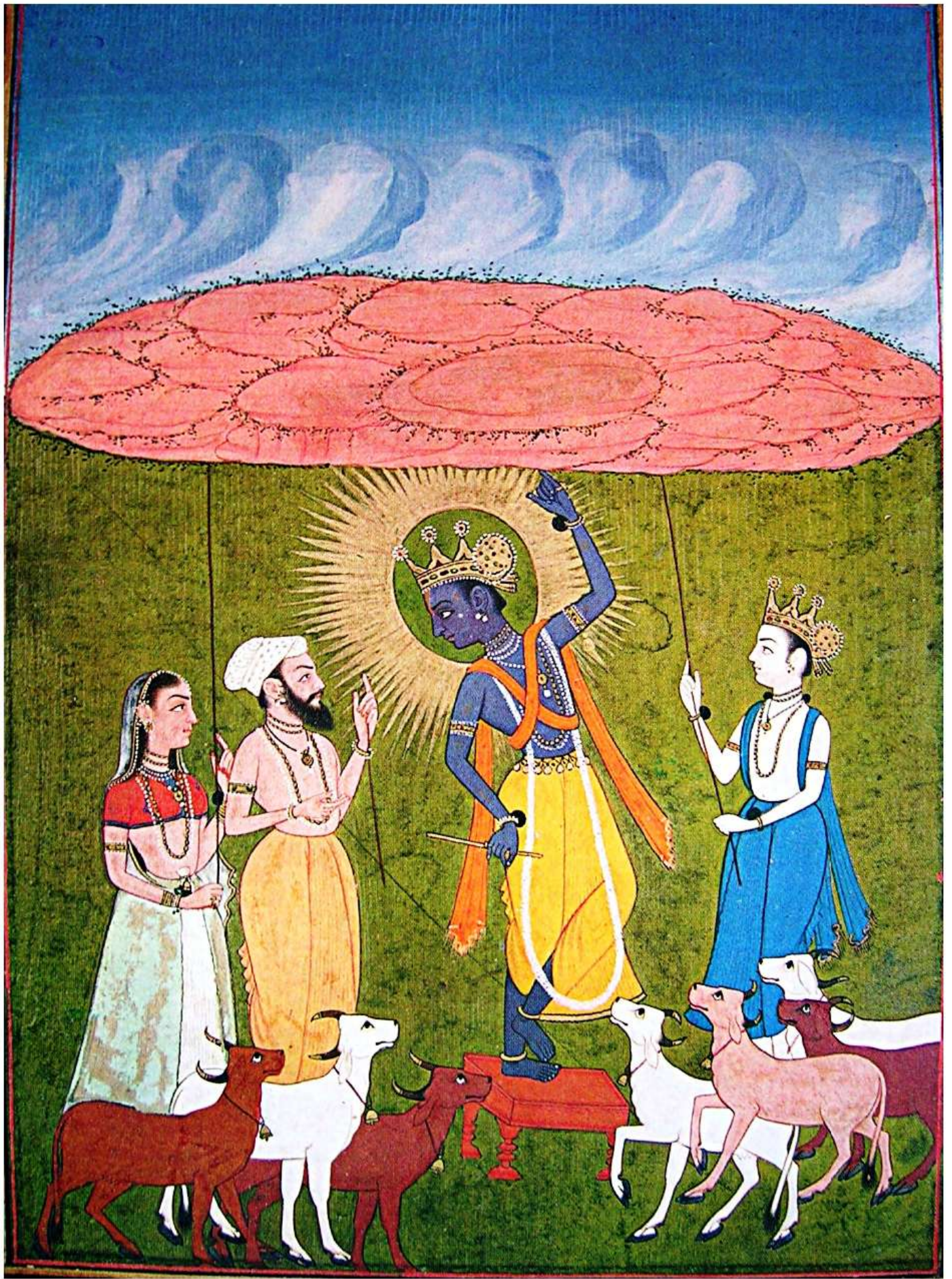
**Goenka Collection, Mumbai**

This iconic representation of Vishnu, seated with his consort Lakshmi on a full-blown lotus carried by his avian vehicle Garuda on his outstretched wings, hails from the same Chamba workshop referred to previously. The crowned Garuda is shown in squatting posture with his hands folded reverently. The verdigris green pigment employed for his body seems to have been oxidized. Four-armed Vishnu with unusually thin wrists carries his conventional attributes of conch, discus, mace, and lotus. However, the mace bears the shape of club, *mudgara*, and this has been also noticed in some other early Chamba paintings. The face of Vishnu is silhouetted against a luminous golden-rayed halo, *prabhamandala*. The deity is clad in yellow dhoti and orange *uttariya*. The light mauve complexion of his body is noticeable in some of the early Chamba paintings of the mid-17th century. A girdle of tiny jingling bells, *kshudra-ghantika*, and necklaces of gold and pearls further embellish the deity. The figure of Lakshmi is shown seated in the lap, her face, a derivative of the type evolved from the Mughal painting of the late Akbari period, had been rendered with minute stippling.

The Chamba provenance of this painting, however, has not received universal acceptance. Prof. B.N. Goswamy ascribes this painting to Bikaner school, and dates it to the third quarter of the 17th century. He writes, "The goddess Lakshmi's figure reminds one in some manner of the work from Ghanerao or Aurangabad – but the face is much softer, and the form far more delicately shaded. The blue strip of sky at the top, above a white band, it needs to be mentioned, reminds one of the puzzling group of paintings which are assigned differently: by some scholars to Bikaner, under Deccani influence, and by others to Mandi."<sup>13</sup>

The following affinities noticed in all the four paintings described above are noteworthy:

1. The typical three-pronged crown studded with jewels terminating in large bulbous end with short flaps.



*Fig.5.7 : Krishna Raising Mount Govardhana, Chamba, mid-17th century, opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 15.5 x 12.2 cm, Coll. L.D. Museum, Ahmedabad, Acc. No. NCM 117*



*Fig.5.8 : Vishnu and Lakshmi seated on Garuda, Chamba, mid-17th century, opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 21 x 15 cm, Goenka Collection, Mumbai*

2. The yellow dhoti and the girdle decorated with tiny bells are common to the figures of Vishnu, Fig.5.8, Krishna, Fig.5.7 and Ganesha, Fig.5.6.
3. The golden-rayed halo noticeable in the figures of Vishnu, Fig.5.8, Krishna, Fig.5.7 and the Devi, Figs.5.5 & 5.6.
4. The elongated arms of the figures with unusual thin wrists adorned with bracelets fastened with conspicuous knots of black thread.
5. The identical female facial types: Goddesses, Figs.5.5 & 5.6, Lakshmi, Fig.5.8 and Radha, Fig.5.7, and identical treatment of hair with minute stippling.
6. series of pearls adorn the border of the veil, dupatta, and its stylized ends; noticeable in both, Figs.5.5 and 5.6.
7. A particular variety of necklace of golden beads and pearls worn by divine beings noticeable in several pictures.
8. The male figures were adorned with guluband, a kind of necklace comprising five strings of gold beads and pearls fastened to the neck.
9. A long floral garland, vaijayantimala, worn by Vishnu, Fig.5.8 and Krishna, Fig.5.7.
10. The scarf with swirling ends worn by the male figures.
11. The use of verdigris pigment employed for the figure of Garuda and costume in Figs.5.6, 5.7 & 5.8.
12. The identical lotus flower held by Vishnu, Fig.5.8 and the eight-armed enthroned Goddess, Fig.5.5.
13. Full-blown lotus flower used as cushion in Figs.5.6 & 5.8.
14. The gold parasols, chhatra, seen in Figs.5.5 and 5.6 are similar.
15. The depiction of rocky mountain, both in colour and shape, in Figs.5.6 and 5.7, remains the same.
16. The use of sage-green colour for the background and white streak below the lapis-blue sky in all the four pictures suggest strong stylistic affinity.
17. A rule of red pigment in the inner margin of Figs.5.7 and 5.8, is another common feature.

## **Conclusion**

All the four paintings, datable to the mid-17th century, share exceptional artistic affinities and traits, compositional conventions and norms which would clearly indicate a Chamba connection. N.C. Mehta procured Fig.5.7 in Chamba, while Jagdish Mittal acquired the damaged picture, Fig.5.5, from one of the descendants of the Gujarati-Manikantth painter family living in Hatnala quarter of the Chamba town. In general, these paintings exhibit a painting style that incorporated both Mughal-Rajput visual elements. This pictorial style was refined in Chamba by the migrant painters under the generous patronage extended by the devout ruler, Raja Balabhadra Varman. Since the young Prithvi Singh had spent his childhood under the protection and hospitality of Raja Hari Sen (1623-1637) of Mandi, he was well acquainted with the painters working at the court atelier. On regaining Chamba, some Mandi painters must have joined Prithvi Singh's atelier. This possibility cannot be ruled out.

## References

1. Foster, William (ed.), *Early Travels in India 1583-1619*, London 1921, New Delhi 1985, p.168.
1. Ohri, V.C., *On the Origins of Pahari Painting*, 1991, pp.11-13.
2. The Chamba paintings at the atelier of Raja Balabhadra Varman, datable to the second quarter of the 17th century, seem to have been inspired from the Popular Mughal style. This style was introduced by the migrant painters during the last decade of Raja Balabhadra Varman's reign.
1. Sharma, Vijay, "A decorated *kavacha* in a temple at Chamba", *Marg*, Vol.57, No.1, 2005, p.68.
2. Hutchison, J. and J. Ph. Vogel, *History of the Punjab Hill States*, Lahore, 1933, Vol.I, p.303.
3. Raja's real name was Shatru Singh as recorded in the copper plate charters issued by him. Since he had defied the orders of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb and embellished the temples with *chhatra*, parasol, he became famous as Chhatra Singh. He expanded his territory up to Kashtwar.
4. Goswamy, B.N. and Eberhard Fischer, *Pahari Masters: Court Painters of Northern India*, Zurich, 1992, pp.128-129, 150; Bhatia, Usha, "Early Miniature Painting from the Punjab Hills: Gujarat Connection", *CSMVS Research Journal 2019*, Saryu Doshi (ed.), Mumbai, 2021, pp.46-61.
5. Raja Ugra Singh of Chamba had set on fire the wooden Chamba town on the eve of the arrival of Dalel Singh, the lawful heir to the throne, from Lahore and had watched the conflagration from the Chamunda temple above while fleeing. See, Hutchison and Vogel, *op.cit.*, p.312.
6. Ohri, V.C., *op.cit.*, Plate 20.
7. Doshi, Saryu, *The Royal Bequest: Art Treasures of the Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery*, Bombay, 1995, p.95.
8. Khandalavala, K.J., *Pahari Miniature Paintings in the N.C. Mehta Collection*, Ahmedabad, 1981, Pl.K, pp.79-80.
9. Published, Goswamy B.N. and Usha Bhatia, *The Painted Vision*, New Delhi, 2000, pl.112.
10. Goswamy, B.N., *Painted Delight: The Goenka Collection of Indian Paintings*, 1999, pl.112, p.143.

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