

# *Picchavaī Painting of Nathadvāra : A Week-long Workshop*

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The sixth *gaddī* (seat) or *pīṭha* of the Vallabha *sampradāya* was shifted to Banaras in 1827 and eventually Gopallalji Mandir (built in 1777) became the nerve center of the *puṣṭimārga* culture in the city. One may presume Nathadvāra painters did visit Banaras in the nineteenth or early twentieth century and made some big-sized *picchavaīs* for the shrine as also enlivened the arched sanctum doorways of Mandir Gopallalji. The guesswork may lead one to the extent that local painters were also engaged to assist and imbibe the nuances of Nathadvāra style for making versions or even do repair work of the paintings in future. In 1979 some of the eminent painters, including Sri Dvarkanathji Sharma and Sri Revaprasadji Sharma were invited to demonstrate the *picchavaīs* technique at the Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi in connection with the celebration of the fifth birth centenary of Sūrdāsa, the leading poet of the *aṣṭachāpa*. Almost three decades later this *Picchavaī* Painting Workshop was held at the Jñāna Pravāha between 25th and 31st December, 2001. Sri Rajaram Sharma and Dr. Yugal Kishore Sharma, the two renowned exponents of the tradition, supervised the work of twenty-nine young participants who received a step-by-step training of the complex process of pigment-painted *picchavaīs*.

Painted hangings had an early origin in India and literary references take us back to Gupta and late-Gupta era. Buddhist *thaṅkāś* and Nevari *paubhas* are the two existing and related types known to this date. All such early scrolls were painted on cotton unlike their Chinese and Central Asian counterparts done on silk. Jaina *paṭas*, painted on cotton and sharing similar technical intricacies, represent a stylistically and thematically divergent group. Belonging to such an early tradition pigments painted *picchavaīs* or ritual temple hangings are normally displayed behind the idol and act quite like a stage backdrop with Kṛṣṇa as the central image for the regular ceremonies held in the *puṣṭimārga* shrines. However, none of the known pigment painted *picchavaīs* predate eighteenth century. Earliest is probably the *Vasanta picchavaī* dated 1799 from Jaipur in Cossimbazar Royal Collection. The *Gopāṣṭamī picchavaī* dated 1847 from Kishangarh is in Bharat Kala Bhavan. *Pavitra picchavaī* and *Dānalilā picchavaī* dated respectively 1864 and 1868 are in the Nathadvāra Temple collection.

Nathadvāra developed an eclectic style borrowing elements from various Rajasthani ateliers. Kishangarh and Kota undoubtedly had the strongest influence. At present there are only two groups of artists, namely *Jāngids* and *Ādi Gauras*, active at Nathadvāra. The *picchavaīs* are generally painted on white cotton fabric by spreading it on the ground and starching it with wheat (*maidā*) paste. This initial priming prevents the colours to bleed through the support. Once the starch dries up blocking of the composition is done with charcoal. The sketching or *tipān* is done with vermilion or Indian red (*geru*). Flat colours are applied in the figures and landscape in stages. Burnishing done with an agate stone (*ghonta*) gives a polish to the entire painted surface, adding an enamel-like brilliance to the pigments. Shading and intricate detailing of the figures, trees, water and billowing cloud patterns are followed by the gold work. The last step is the completion of the creeper pattern in the border. Pigments used traditionally are either of mineral or organic origin. The broad brushes (*jārā*) made from goat hair is used for painting large areas while the finer details are done with thin (*jhīnā*) ones made from the hair of squirrel tails.