



Fig.11.11 : Krishna and Balrama at bath, fine embroidery like Chamba *rumals* in broad hem of *ghaghras*, Kangra c.1820, opaque watercolour, gold and silver on paper, 27.4 x 20.3 cm, Harvard Art Museum, Acc. No. 1971.134, Photo courtesy - author

One of the exquisite and spectacular forms of Indian embroidery, popularly known as Pahari embroidery, is carried out in the western Himalayan region. However, the tradition is particularly famous for Chamba *rumals*. These are coverings for *thals*, bronze platters carrying religious offerings, and their elegance and grandeur witnessed the patronage of royalty since historical times. Apart from these coverlets, embroidery has been carried out on courtly costumes and furnishings for the royal household. Before partition, this embroidery was practised in a much wider region known as Pahari states of Punjab comprising of today's Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, some parts of Jammu, and Haryana. The major centres, Fig.11.1, were Chamba, Kangra, Basohli, Nurpur, Jammu, Haripur, Guler, Bilaspur, Salyali, Mandi and Kullu, Hoshiarpur, etc. These centres had numerous working styles and produced a range of articles embellished with embroidery.

Out of this big umbrella of craft, only Chamba *rumals* are being made today in the Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh. The single-sided embroidery is neither known nor practised anymore in Chamba. As the focus of revival activities concentrated only on Chamba *rumals*, the broad spectrum of Pahari embroidery was reduced to double-sided form of craft. This paper would focus on the complete ensemble of costumes, notably, Pahari embroidered *choli*, blouse, worn along with *ghaghra*, skirt, and *dupatta*, head-shawl. An extended reference to *khadi*-printed textiles of the region widens the context.

### Embroidered Costume

The Pahari costumes are deeply rooted in the folk culture of the region as reflected in the traditions and practices. These have been illustrated in wall reliefs and sculptures, murals and miniature paintings and there also survived specimens of embroidered costumes. The two earliest evidences of patterned *ghaghra* with *choli* come from wall relief of the Kangra Fort and from the fountain stone-slabs of Chamba in Himachal Pradesh. The Kangra Fort was constructed around 3500 years ago by Raja Susharma Chandra, a descendant of Katoch family. The skirt of Goddess Mahishasura-mardini in one of the stone reliefs from Kangra fort, Fig.11.2, shows scalloped patterns and broad hem with chevron designs.

As stated by V.C. Ohri, "the embroidery was not an exceptional art form as one would find embroidered dress on figures carved on fountain slabs belonging to 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries".<sup>1</sup> Fountain stone-slabs, Fig.11.3, were placed near water sources in various towns and villages in Chamba and display patterned costume. These early stone reliefs would indicate the existence of a tradition of embroidery on costumes other than spectacular *pahari rumals* from later era.

### Embroidered *Cholis*

Amongst all utility articles, Pahari *cholis* are the most familiar form of single-sided embroidery. To quote B.N. Goswamy, "*cholis* are widely adopted by the people of North India, especially in Punjab and Rajasthan. With its great popularity among the Rajputs, the short bodice became a prominent presence in medieval times."<sup>2</sup>This is evident in two 19<sup>th</sup>-century paintings by Kehar Singh. In one of the paintings,

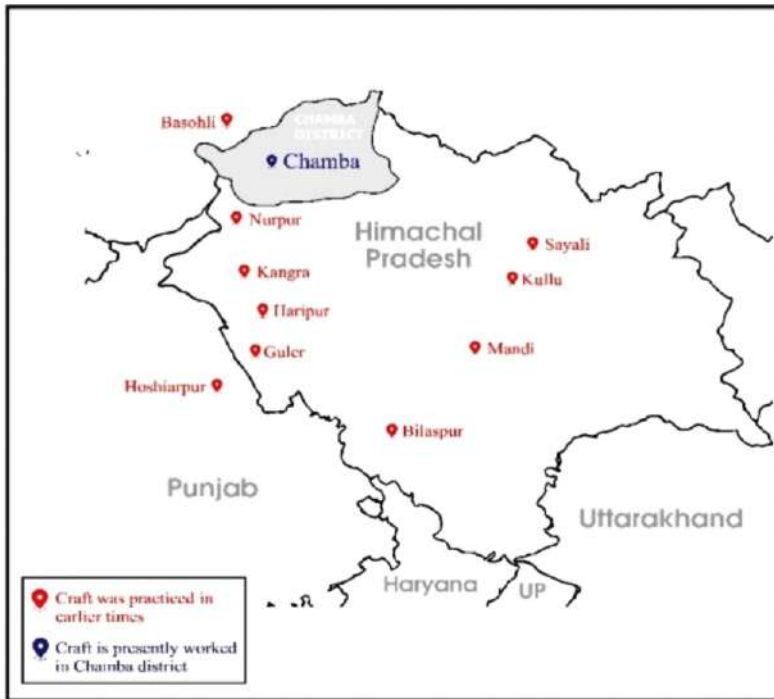


Fig.11.1 : Centres of Pahari embroidery, Photo courtesy - author

datable to 1875, a tracker, *khoji*, was depicted with his companion wearing a coarse *ghaghra* skirt and a short low *choli* with *petia*, Fig.11.4. The *khojis* belong to Bawaria tribe, found in Rajasthan, south of Punjab, Ferozpur and neighbouring territories.<sup>3</sup> The second painting, Fig.11.5, showing the daily life at Harmandir Sahib or Golden Temple at Amritsar, illustrates devotees and their religious practices.<sup>4</sup> Assigned roughly to 1850-1872, this painting shows a woman wearing short red *choli* with green *petia* worn with *dhoti* and *dupatta*. *Petia* is a waist flap used for covering the waist below the breast area. These two examples indicate that short

*cholis* with *petia* were extensively worn by women in undivided Punjab. Interestingly, in Pahari states *cholis* were embellished with characteristic embroidery. These are hand-sewn, hand-embroidered blouses made of dark red or indigo *khaddar* fabrics and can be worn with or without *petia*.

Pahari embroidered *cholis* show two distinct designs, bold curved motifs and minute geometrical patterns. Both the styles of design are executed in a different set of stitches which lend the motifs a very distinct form. Bold curved motifs depict stylistic flora and fauna, Fig.11.6a. Geometrical patterns show a variety of designs divided in smaller spaces, Fig.11.6b. The embroidery was done with untwisted silk yarns. Major portions of the design had been worked in off-white and yellow silk. Green, red and blue embroidery threads were used marginally to balance the dark cotton background. Such characteristic colour scheme added a distinctive appearance to these Pahari embroidered *cholis*. Mostly these *cholis* are worked in single-sided stitches; the stitches most

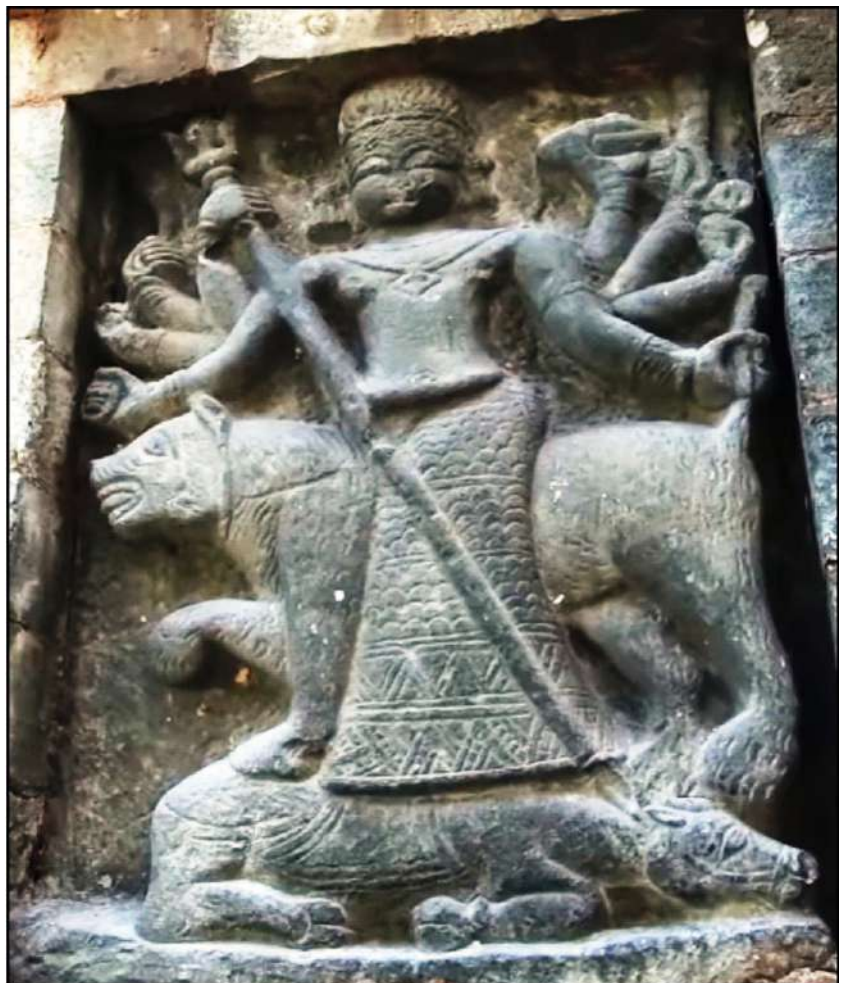


Fig.11.2 : Mahishasur-mardini, Kangra Fort, Himachal Pradesh c.3<sup>rd</sup> century, stone, Photo courtesy - author



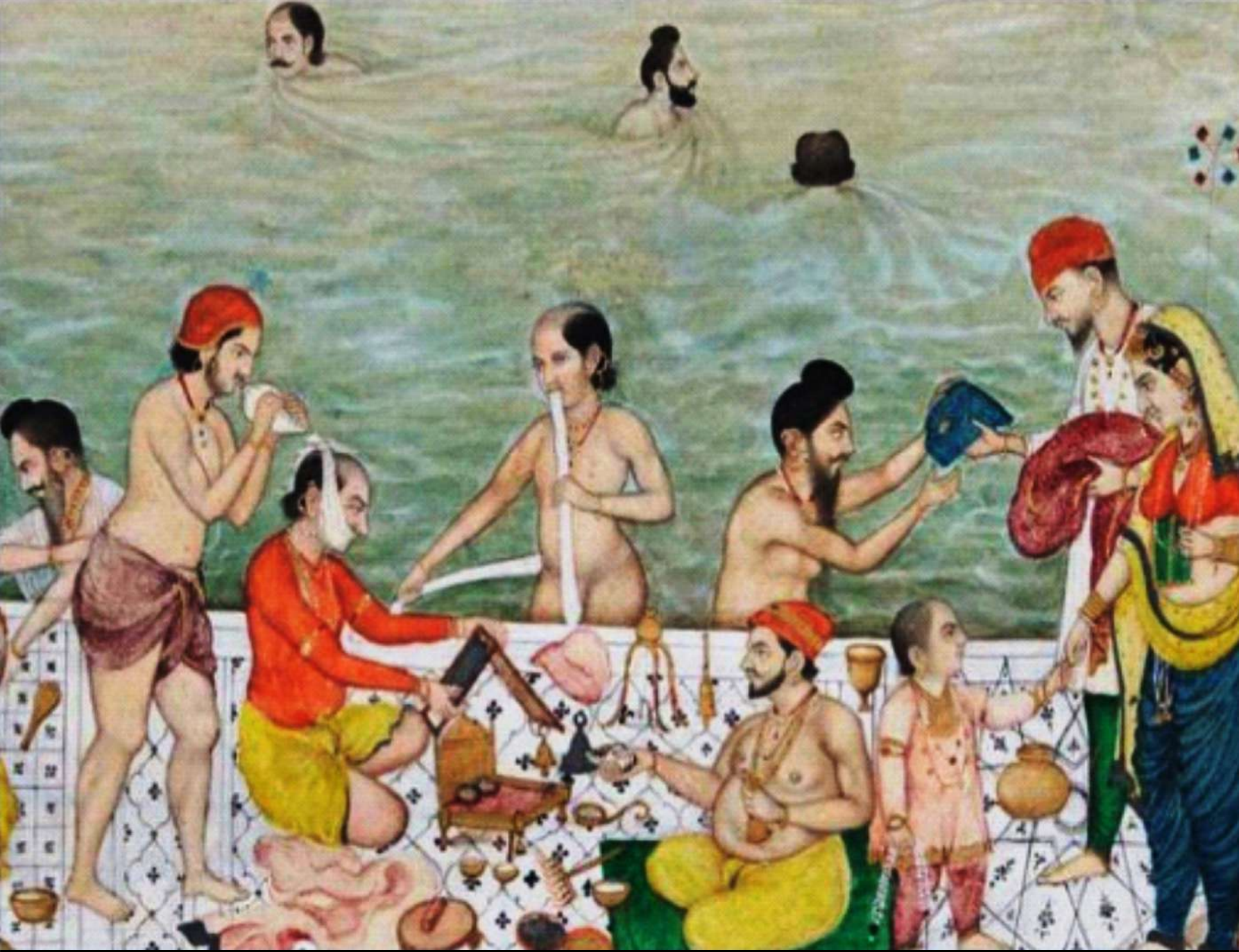
Fig.11.3 : Fountain slab showing patterned costumes worn by the figures, Chamba c.12<sup>th</sup> century, stone, Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, Photo courtesy - author

frequently used were darning stitch in straight, brick and zigzag arrangement. In addition, pattern-darning and stem-stitch, square chain-stitch and double cross-stitch and herring-bone stitch were also introduced suitably. The characteristic feature that adds charm to the entire composition is the outline-stitch, i.e. square chain-stitch in yellow colour.

The depiction of these *cholis* in Pahari miniature paintings opens an interesting world. Datable to c.1735, The Ballad of the Princess and Drummer Boy from Guler workshop, Fig.11.7,<sup>5</sup> shows indigo dyed *choli* with floral design in white. The same design can be also seen on the hem of the *ghaghra*. The red and indigo-dyed embroidered fabrics tied at the drum have floral patterns in white. Prikshit Sharma, a miniature painter from Chamba, mentioned that the folk musician couple depicted in the painting belongs to an ethnic group called *doumaney*, who travel around 60-70 kms in areas neighbouring to



Fig.11.4 : Couple belonging to Bawaria tribe the female is wearing a short *choli* with *petia* Kehar Singh, c.1875, opaque watercolour on paper Government Museum and Art Gallery Chandigarh, Photo courtesy - author



Chamba town during the festival time of Sui Mata. They go door to door and sing traditional folk musical compositions to gather food and discarded clothes. Often these discarded clothes are tied on the drum as a regular practice, signifying good omen. In a review of ethnographic series and *District Handbook I Chamba*, in *Census of India 1961*, information on this nomadic ethnic group is referred by different names in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh as *Doom* or *Dumna (Mahashay)* or *Dumne (banjare)*. They work with bamboo to make sieves, winnowing pans, fans, matting grass rope and strings, vessels, baskets, screens, furniture, etc. They are also engaged in cultivation, agricultural labour, or dancing singing, or playing upon musical instruments in marriage processions.<sup>6</sup>

The other painting, Fig.11.8, Raja Shamsher Sen with Companions in Female Garb from Mandi of c.1730, shows indigo *choli* with impressions in white and *ghagra* in dull silver horizontal rows with black hem. In both the paintings, Figs.11.7 & 11.8, the indigo-dyed *cholis* can be seen with designs in white, which gives the impression of embroidered Pahari *cholis* as seen in Fig.11.6. Usually, the painted depictions of these embroidered *cholis* are in dark indigo colour with some impressions in white colour, resembling closely the actual surviving specimens. However, the skirts in both the paintings are different. In the first painting, Fig.11.7, may be seen a skirt with a hem in indigo with floral design. In the second painting, Fig.11.8, dull silver print in horizontal rows was enhanced with a black hem. These are being discussed in the following section on the embroidered *ghaghras*.

In my field survey, I studied specimens of embroidered costumes in Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba. The museum has on display embroidered *choli* and wide *ghaghra* with surface prints in silver *khadi* printing, Fig.11.9. Again, this particular example of *ghaghra* is comparable to the costume shown in the miniature painting from Mandi, Fig.11.8.

### **Embroidered Ghaghras**

The *ghaghras* were elaborately decorated with patterns, either embroidered or *khadi*-printed. Numerous such *ghaghras* depicted in paintings have been studied in addition to virtual museum collections. It had been also observed that miniature painters rather deliberately tried to represent both, the embroidered and printed decoration distinctly. Embroidery is usually shown in a brighter white tone on a darker background while the metallic prints are sometimes shown in dull silver or golden metallic hues.

In paintings, the embroidery is seen on broad hem of *ghaghras*, Figs.10a & b. The colour scheme also remains fixed for *ghaghras* which is either red with hem in indigo or vice versa. Noticeable in the paintings of Vishnu and Lakshmi, Fig.11.10a, and Radha and Krishna, Fig.11.10b, is the embroidered

◀  
Fig.11.5 : View of Harmandir Sahib detail: woman wearing a short *choli* with *petia*  
Bishan Singh, c.1850-1872  
gouache and gold on paper  
48.2 x 64.7 cm  
Present Collection unknown



Fig.11.6a : Pahari *cholis* with *petia khaddar* fabric with silk embroidery in free hand curved designs  
Mandi/Chamba, early-20<sup>th</sup> century  
Philadelphia Museum of Art  
Acc. No. 2010-18-1, Photo courtesy - author



Fig.11.6b : Pahari *cholis* with *petia*, *khaddar* fabric with silk embroidery in geometrical patterns  
Kangra, early-20<sup>th</sup> century  
Museum of Folk and Tribal Art  
Gugaon, Haryana, Photo courtesy - author



▲ Fig.11.7 : The Ballad of the Princess and Drummer Boy, painting showing embroidery in *choli*, hem of *ghaghra* and fabrics tied on the drum, Guler c.1735-40, opaque watercolour on paper 29.2 x 46.8 cm, Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh Acc. No. 173, Photo courtesy - author



◀ Fig.11.8 : Pahari *choli* with *ghaghra* in silver print, worn by one of the male attendants, Mandi c.1730, 30 x 19.6 cm Museum Rietberg Zurich, Switzerland Acc. No. RVI 1295, Photo courtesy - author



Fig.11.9 : Pahari *choli* and *ghaghra* cotton *choli* with *petia* has silk embroidery and *ghaghra* has surface ornamentation with metallic printing, Chamba, c.19<sup>th</sup> century Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, Photo courtesy - author



Fig.11.10a : Vishnu Lakshmi on a lotus, *Swapna Darshana* series  
Guler, c.1780, opaque watercolour on paper, 11 x 9.5 cm  
San Diego Museum of Art, Acc. No. 1990.1275, Photo courtesy - author



Fig.11.10b : Krishna Distracts a Herder Girl  
embroidery in broad hem of *ghaghra*, Guler  
c.1790, opaque watercolour and gold on paper  
18.4 x 11.4 cm, Edwin Binney, 3<sup>rd</sup>  
Collection, Photo courtesy - author

broad hem of *ghaghras* in indigo-dyed fabric. The bold curved designs and geometrical designs beautify the hem while the main body of *ghaghras* is left plain. The designs are same as seen in *cholis* in Figs.11.6a & 11.b. The white impressions on them point towards embroidery similar to *cholis*.

**Embroidery similar to Chamba Rumals on Ghaghras:** Other than these simpler designs on a skirt with darker background in white, fine colourful embroidery on a white background resembling Chamba *rumal* has also been noticed, Fig.11.11. This miniature painting from Kangra court atelier beautifully illustrates the bathing scene of child Krishna and Balarama.<sup>8</sup> Yashoda and one of the attending women carrying the crown wear *ghaghra* having a broad white hem embellished with coloured threads. An embroidered *patka* or sash in similar style of embroidery can be seen in the portrait of Raja Prakash Chand (r.1773-1790) of Guler.<sup>9</sup>

**Khadi-printed Ghaghras:** In a painting of c.1820 from Guler School, Krishna reaching for the moon<sup>10</sup>, Fig.11.12, one would notice a variety of skirts popular in the contemporary era. One example with horizontal coloured stripes with a broad hem in red has golden impressions. In the same painting, an indigo skirt shows circular golden impressions in the upper portion and a red hem in dull gold imprints. Similarly, the red skirt of Yashoda has a plain upper body and indigo hem with impressions in dull gold, suggesting metallic printing. It is noted that embroidery imprints are sharper and shown in white colour as seen in Fig.11.10 while metallic prints are shown in duller tones of gold or silver as noticeable in this painting.

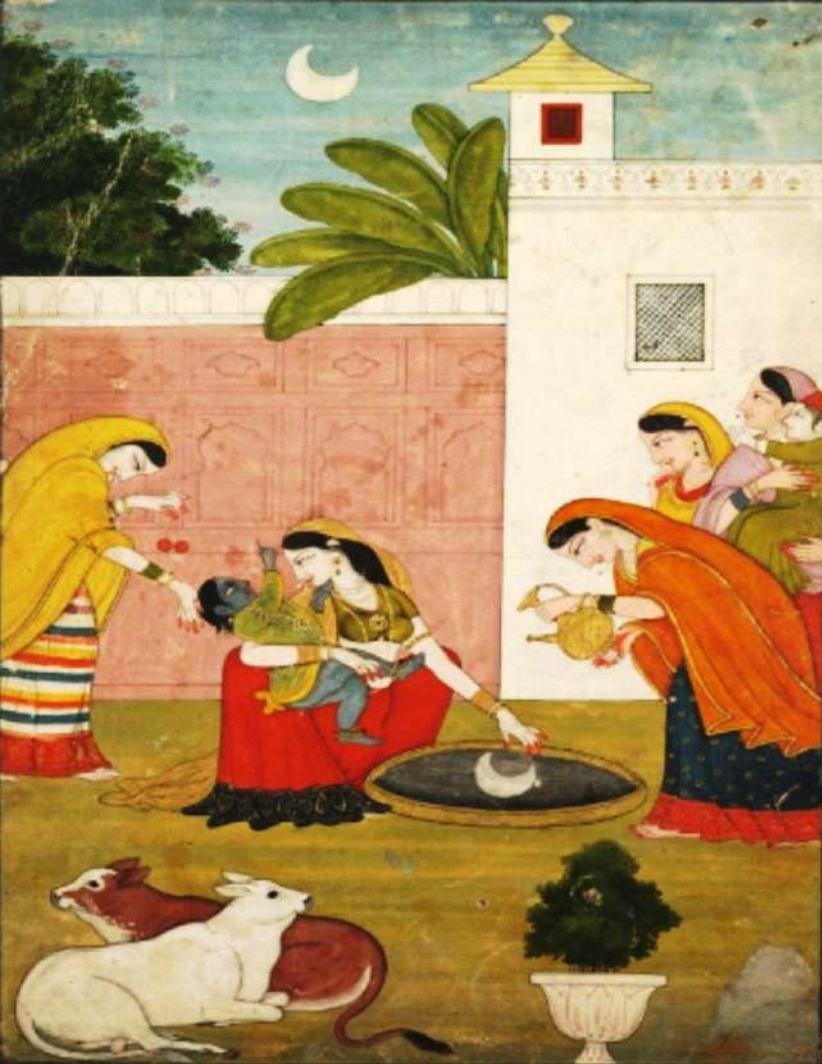


Fig.11.12 : Krishna reaching for the moon, metallic printing in broad hem of *ghaghras* in dull gold, Guler, c.1820 opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 24 x 16 cm Cleveland Museum of Art, Acc. No. 1971.80 Photo courtesy - author

Fig.11.13 : Parvati Shiva bathe Ganesha, *dupatta* with metallic impressions in dull gold along with white embroidery in broad hem of *ghaghra*, Kangra c.18<sup>th</sup> century, opaque watercolour and gold on paper Allahabad Museum, Photo courtesy - author



Fig.11.15 : *Proshita-patika Nayika*, red and indigo screen with white impressions similar to embroidery hung over the door in the background, Bilaspur, c.1740 opaque watercolour on paper, 24.3 x 15.2 cm Victoria and Albert Museum, London Acc. No. IS.174-1951, Photo courtesy - author



Fig.11.14 : A folio from *Usha-charita*, screen in dull gold hinting metallic printing, Guler c.1780, Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, Photo courtesy - author

Eminent artist Vijay Sharma mentioned that *chappiayre*, calico printers, were residing in the town in Chamba since long. Perhaps, along with embroidery there continued calico printing as an equally popular medium of adorning fabrics for *ghaghras* which are teamed up with embroidered *cholis*. A significant piece of information about the family of metallic printers residing in Chamba had been published by V.C. Ohri. According to him, during the 1911 Coronation Darbar at Delhi, many Chamba *rumals* were produced and taken for display and distribution in Delhi. These *rumals* were worked by many ladies residing in the town, out of these there were two sisters Nanno and Hattoo belonging to a Sikh family. It has also been mentioned that this family migrated from Punjab to Chamba in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued the family craft of block-printing on cloth with liquefied silver and gold.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Dupattas*

Patterning was done on the *dupattas*, dyed either in red or indigo, with embroidery or *khadi*-printing

with metallic pigment. Parvati and Shiva bathing Ganesha, Fig.11.13, has depiction of *ghaghra* and *dupatta* worn with plain *choli*. The red *ghaghra* with broad indigo hem is decorated with patterns in white and designs on the *dupatta* were imprinted in gold.

Interestingly, in quest of these traditional costumes in Pahari miniature painting, similar embroidery with white thread had been traced in furnishings, particularly, on screens and hangings. A Guler painting, Fig.11.14, depicting Usha's Dream<sup>12</sup>, has depiction of red and indigo screens covering the doorway with impressions in dull gold, hinting at metallic printing. In a Bilaspur painting of *Proshita-patika Nayika*, Fig.11.15, one notices two rolled-up screens over the door.<sup>13</sup> The outer edges of the screen are in indigo with white impressions. The inner layer is of red fabric. The ornamentation in white on the outer edges of the screen resembles very closely the embroidery seen in Pahari *cholis* and *ghaghras*.

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