

Chapter 3

Socio-Political and Cultural Background

of Chamba

The principal objective of this chapter is to enumerate and investigate the social, political, and cultural factors that I believe shaped the painting tradition of Chamba. It traces the evolution of subject-matter and tracks the migration of artists and their interaction with other artisans of Chamba that eventually gives rise to the Chamba school and impacts its vocabulary.

The chapter's primary concerns include –

1. Analysis of the topography of Chamba
2. Discussion on the political history of the ruling family
3. Listing of the genealogy of the Rajas
4. Exploration of the cults and religious beliefs prevalent in the region
5. Examination of the social division of the masses and the urban layout of the Chamba town

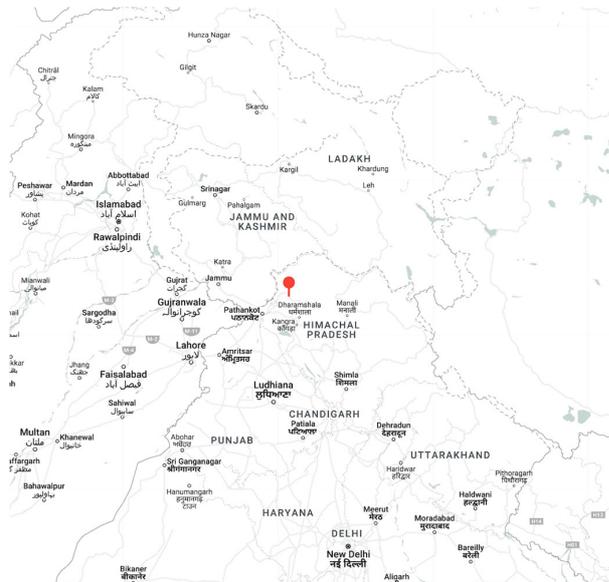


Fig. 3.1 Location of Chamba in the political map of North India

3.1 Topography and Political History

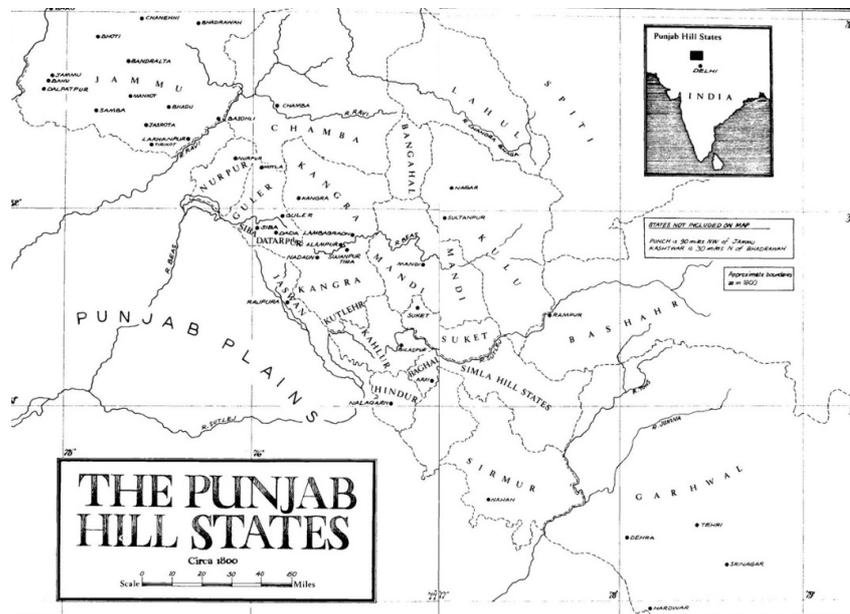


Fig. 3.2 Political boundaries of Chamba and other Pahari hill-states (c. 1800)
 Published in Archer, W. G. 1973. *Indian Paintings from the Punjab Hills: A Survey and History of Pahari Miniature Painting: Vol. I*, Sotheby Parke Bernet.

The erstwhile chiefdom of Chamba (Fig. 3.1) is part of the present-day Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. It is situated in the bosom of the North-Western Himalayas, bounded by Jammu and Kashmir on the North-West, Ladakh on the North-East, Lahul on the East, Kangra on the South-East and South, and Punjab on the West. At its peak, the chiefdom encompassed the entire mountain fringe to the south of the Dhaula Dhar, known as Rihlu and Palam (in modern-day Kangra), as well as Padar and Bhadrawah in Jammu and Kashmir's Chinab Valley, nearly doubling its current territory¹ (Fig. 3.2). Former states with which Chamba shared political boundaries included Basohli in the West, Jammu in the North-West, Bhadarwah and Kishtawar in the North, Ladakh in the North-East, Lahul in the East, Kulu in the South-East, and Kangra and Nurpur in the South-West.² As these regions were also important centres of Pahari

¹ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. 1933. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*. Superintendent Government Printing, 268.

² The present district of Chamba is comprised of two valleys – the Ravi valley and the Chandrabhaga valley. The Ravi valley is relatively open and accessible and was formerly the main route into Chamba via Nurpur. It is located at a low elevation, around 3000 feet and the pass is guarded by the enormous Dhauladhar mountain, which rises to an elevation of 19000 feet, separating Chamba's Ravi valley from the neighboring Kangra valley. The Chandrabhaga valley is bounded on the north by the Pir Panjal Mountain range, which separates Chamba and Ladakh. The region is higher in

painting, the discussion will revolve around the historical overlapping which influenced painting activity at Chamba.

The primary authorial source for the political history of Chamba is *vamsavali*, the royal genealogical record, which, in addition to listing all the Rajas, offers details of the all the historical events that transpired in Chamba and the neighbouring states of Basohli, Jammu, Nurpur, Mandi, Kangra etc.³ Hutchison and Vogel establish the historical veracity of this royal chronicle, though not without caution, and use it to reconstruct Chamba's political history.⁴

The second important source for the study of Chamba's political and social history are the epigraphical records and copper plate title-deeds, which number in excess of 150 and are housed at the Bhuri Singh Museum in Chamba, as well as are in the possession of various Brahmin, Rajput and Khatri families scattered throughout the town. The timeframe considered for study in this chapter is from the mid-16th century till the mid-18th century, as the social factors and political events which shaped the emergence and sequential development of Chamba painting took place within this period.

From as early as the 10th century, the Rajas of Chamba had allied with the kingdom of Kashmir, which claimed suzerainty over Chamba and its neighbouring hill-states.⁵ The names of the Rajas of Chamba, which include Asata Varmana (1080 CE), Jasata Varmana (1105 CE), and Udaya Varmana (1120 CE), find regular mentions in the chronicle of Rajatarangani.⁶ Hutchison and Vogel⁷ have stated that Raja Vijay Varmana of Chamba (1175 CE) had invaded Kashmir and Ladakh, enlarging the boundaries of Chamba in the North and the North-East. The immediately following period of roughly 400 years (1175-1575) is described by Hutchison and Vogel⁸ as the

elevation than the Ravi valley, at 9000 feet above sea level, with mountain peaks exceeding 21,000 feet.

³ The *vamsavali* was started by Pandit Ramapati during the reign of Raja Pratap Singh Varmana (r. 1559–86) and was then extended by subsequent authors, about whom pertinent information is scarce.

⁴ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 291

⁵ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 292

⁶ Kalhana and M. A Stein. 1989. *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī. Vol. I: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kaśmīr*, Reprint ed.

⁷ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 295

⁸ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 296

period of Chamba's 'complete independence', while Ohri⁹ notes it as the period of 'isolation'.¹⁰ This period of independence/isolation ended with the reign of **Raja Ganesh Varmana** of Chamba (r. 1512–59).¹¹ This Raja erected the Ganeshgarh Fort in the Mothila ilaqa in order to consolidate his influence south of the Dhaula Dhar.¹² This occurred shortly after Akbar's incursion into the outer Shivaliks in quest of Sikandar Shah Suri, who sought refuge in the fort at Mankot.¹³ The Raja of Nurpur was transported to Lahore and killed for siding with Sikander Shah Suri.¹⁴ This occurrence, in my opinion, indicates that Mughal influence had begun to exert itself in the North-Western hill-states by the mid-16th century.

Chamba, however, did not become a tributary of the Mughal Empire until the reign of Ganesh Varmana's son **Pratap Singh Varmana** (r. 1559–86). Todar Mal was entrusted by Akbar with the task of establishing an imperial demesne in Kangra which led to a demand made on each of the neighbouring states to cede a piece of their territory equal to their means.¹⁵ As a result, Chamba was forced to hand over Rihlu, Chari, and Gharorh¹⁶. For the following 200 years, Chamba was directly subordinate to the Mughal empire as a result of this occurrence. This event determines that the period of 400 years of political independence that was enjoyed by the Chamba state had ended and the subordination to an external political force in the form of the Mughals had commenced.¹⁷

Pratap Singh Varmana's term was followed by his son **Vir Vahnu**'s four-year-long reign. Chamba's *vamsavali* roll makes no note of any significant events that may

⁹ Ohri, V.C. 1976. "Chamba Painting." PhD diss., Punjab University, Chandigarh, 45

¹⁰ The period of independence, in my view, was probably due to the political instability in Kashmir in the 13th century which paved way for the establishment of the Shah Mir Dynasty of Kashmir. The Chamba court had historically shared social, religious, cultural, and matrimonial ties with Kashmir, which might have been discontinued due to the establishment of an Islamic Sultanate. On the other hand, the Kashmir Sultanate during this period also ceases to take interest in the matters of the hill-states and shifts its political and cultural attention towards Central Asia. This bilateral discontinuation of political allegiance and cultural exchange resulted in the 'political independence' as well as the 'cultural isolation' of Chamba.

¹¹ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 296

¹² Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*,

¹³ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 297

¹⁴ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*

¹⁵ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 298

¹⁶ Territories on the southern end of the state, bordering Kangra.

¹⁷ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 298.

have occurred during this period, a fact also supported by the absence of any significant copper-plate¹⁸ issued during his reign. In 1589, Vir Vahnu was succeeded by his son **Balabhadra Varmana**.¹⁹

This Raja is mainly recognised for his piety and enormous generosity, which earned him the moniker 'Bali-Karna' — after two mythological figures renowned for their bounteousness.²⁰ He lavishly awarded land grants on Brahmins and saw this as his highest and most vital responsibility, refusing to eat each morning until this was accomplished.²¹ Balabhadra's grants during his reign outnumber those of any previous or subsequent Raja of Chamba. His charitable actions continued for several years, to the chagrin and embarrassment of the governmental administration. As a result, Balabhadra was stripped of his 'Raja' powers and was succeeded, though still alive, by his son **Janardan Varmana** in 1613.^{22,23} Balabhadra Varmana's reign (1589—13/1623—41) marked the beginning of a period of political instability in the history of Chamba.

It is during the reign of **Janardan Varmana** that Mughal emperor Jahangir visited the neighbouring state of Nurpur in 1622. The Mughal emperor was waited on by the hill chiefs, and among them reference is made in Tuzk-i-Jahangiri to the 'Raja of Chamba'. The reference recorded is:

¹⁸ The copper plates found abundantly in Chamba play a crucial role in comprehending the social and political environment of the state. These plates, issued by the Raja as charters to authenticate land grants, royal decrees, and testify acts of piety, were primarily inscribed in Sanskrit using the Takri script, accompanied by a vernacular translation at the end. However, during the mid-18th century, the vernacular Chambyali language took precedence, entirely replacing Sanskrit. Furthermore, studying the copper plates is essential for tracing the evolution of the Takri script.

¹⁹ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 299

²⁰ This fact is supported by a portrait of Raja Bhalabhadra Varmana bearing a Takri inscription identifying him as 'Balikarna'

²¹ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 299

²² Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 301

²³ There is an obscurity as to the year of Balabhadra's deposition as the copper plates of his reign continue till 1641, the year of his death. On a 1613 plate, Balabhadra is referred to as Raja, while his son Janardan is referred to as 'Maharajaputra' and 'Maharajakumara'. The fact that the plate was issued in Janardan's name implies that he was in charge at the time and served as a regent, rather than assuming full power in his own name. (Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 301)

“At this station the offering of the Raja of Chamba was inspected. His land is twenty-five kos from Kangra, and there is no Zamindar mightier than he in this hill country. His land is an asylum for all the Zamindars of the area because it has defiles that are so difficult to negotiate. Until now he has neither paid homage to any monarch nor sent any tribute. His brother also paid homage and performed the rituals of subservience and allegiance on the Zamindar’s behalf. He seemed rather urbane and intelligent, and he was received with shows of favour.”²⁴

Soon afterwards, conflicts between Chamba and Nurpur²⁵ erupted, and in 1623, Raja Jagat Singh of Nurpur attacked Chamba.²⁶ Finally, Janardan Varman was assassinated by Jagat Singh, and Chamba became a province of Nurpur for eighteen years. Balabhadra was reinstalled as Raja of Chamba and ruled the state under the subjugation of Jagat Singh until 1641.²⁷

Janardan Varmana, on the other hand, had a four-year-old son named Prithvi, who was rumoured to have been smuggled out of the palace by his wet-nurse Batlo. 'Dai-Batlo,' as she is known in Chamba, saved the young prince's life by secretly transporting him to Mandi.^{28,29} The prince was raised by the Mandi chief Hari Sen, who fostered him until he reached adulthood. This act strengthened ties between Mandi and Chamba.

²⁴ Jahangir and W. M Thackston. 1999. *The Jahangirnama : Memoirs of Jahangir Emperor of India*. New York: Freer Gallery of Art Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in association with Oxford University Press, 375.

²⁵ The rivalry between Nurpur and Chamba in the early 17th century holds immense significance, leaving an indelible mark on the political history of the North-Western Himalayas. Delving into this historical feud poses challenges, given the scarcity of available data. Nonetheless, through my investigation, I hypothesize that the initial dynamics between the two states were somewhat amicable. A crucial piece of evidence supporting this theory is the fact that Suraj Mal, elder brother of Raja Jagat Singh of Nurpur, sought sanctuary in Chamba after his failed attempt to capture the Kangra fort under the orders of Jahangir. Suraj Mal's demise while in Chamba likely intensified the enmity between the Chamba and Nurpur states.

²⁶ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 303

²⁷ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 303

²⁸ The decision made by Batlo to transport the infant prince to Mandi carries notable significance, as it unveils the intricate political dynamics shared by the Chamba and Mandi states during that time. While historical records provide limited information about the political and diplomatic relationship between Chamba and Mandi before the reign of [future] Raja Prithvi Singh, it can be inferred that a favourable and amicable association must have existed between the two chiefdoms. This positive relationship likely served as the driving force behind the wet-nurse's choice to bring the infant to Mandi.

²⁹ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 303

By 1641, the relationship between Raja Jagat Singh of Nurpur and the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan had fallen sour, and he rebelled against Shah Jahan.^{30,31} The emperor did not take kindly to the uprising, and in August 1641, he dispatched a huge army under the command of Prince Murad Baksh to suppress it.³² By this time, **Prithvi Singh** had matured into adulthood, which afforded him the opportunity to strike a decisive blow for the restoration of his empire.³³ Prithvi Singh sought support from the Rajas of Mandi and Suket and reclaimed his way to Chamba, ousting the Nurpur authorities from the state.³⁴ The episode has been recorded in the text of Padshahnama in the following manner:

“On the 23rd of Ramzan (16th December, 1641 CE), the high-born prince (Prince Murad Baksh), in accordance with the sublime orders, sent Prithvi Chand, the Zemindar of Champa (read Chamba), whose father had been killed by the outcast Jagat Singh, and who was at this time enrolled among the royal servants, on the recommendation of the ministers of the state, to the royal threshold, the abode of great kings, along with Alla Vardi Khan and Mir Buzurg, who had gone to bring him [...] Prithvi Chand, the Zemindar of Champa (read Chamba), was honoured with a khilat, an inlaid dagger, the title of ‘Commander of one thousand,’ and the actual command of four hundred horsemen, the title of Raja and a horse...”³⁵

Prithvi Singh immediately began consolidating and expanding Chamba state following his return. He subjugated the Ranas³⁶ of Pangi and brought the province directly under

³⁰ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 304

³¹ Jagat Singh enjoyed several political favours during the reign of Jahangir due to his close relationship with Jahangir and Nurjahan. He named his capital of Dharmeti Nurpur in an homage to ‘Nuruddin’ Jahangir. The *Vamsavali* of Chamba tauntingly calls Jagat Singh *yavana sachiva* – the secretary of the Mughals.

³² Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 304

³³ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 304

³⁴ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 304

³⁵ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 305

³⁶ The political landscape of the Chamba region was characterised by the presence of semi-autonomous administrators known as Ranas, who exercised a certain degree of authority over territories subject to the jurisdiction of the chieftom. Notably, regions such as Pangi and Churah had long been under the dominion of the Chamba throne, with the Ranas pledging their allegiance to the ruling Chamba Raja. However, it is plausible to surmise that a period of discontent and unrest occurred during the Nurpur rule in Chamba, which likely instigated the Ranas of Pangi to revolt against the authority of the Chamba throne. Consequently, the subjugation of the Rana of Pangi by Prithvi Singh marked a significant turning point in the resurgence of Chamba as a prominent regional power.

Chamba's rule. Additionally, he constructed *kothis* and governmental offices in Churah and Pangi. Also, Prithvi Singh reached an agreement with Raja Sangram Pal of Basohli, ceding control of the *paragana* of Bhalai to Chamba.³⁷

After completing the consolidation of his realm, Prithvi Singh travelled to Prayag, Kashi, and Gaya on a pilgrimage.³⁸ Additionally, he is reported to have visited Delhi nine times during Shah Jahan's reign and to have been greeted with great courtesy and was awarded a *jagir* in Jaswan valued at Rs. 16000.³⁹ Prithvi Singh is said to have been presented with valuables during his travels to Delhi, including inlaid daggers and a jewelled *sirpaich*.⁴⁰ The acquisition of the Raghubir idol by Prithvi Singh, as reported, is believed to have occurred during one of his visits to the Mughal Durbar. Prior to finding its way into the possession of the Chamba ruling family, the Raghubir idol was originally intended for utilitarian purposes such as weighing grains within the Mughal Palace.⁴¹

Prithvi Singh died in 1664 and was survived by eight sons. These were – Chattar Singh, Jai Singh, Indar Singh, Mahipat Singh, Raghunath Singh, Ram Singh, Shakat Singh and Raj Singh.

Chattar Singh (born Shatru Singh) must have been in his early twenties when he ascended the throne of Chamba following the untimely demise of Prithvi Singh.⁴² The young Raja demonstrated his ability as a diplomat and commander when he invaded Basohli and restored Bhalai *pargana* to Chamba in 1666, carried his arms lower to Padar (modern-day Bhadarwah, Jammu and Kashmir), annexed Chandrabhaga valley,

³⁷ Historically the chiefdoms of Chamba and Basohli engaged in a prolonged struggle to gain dominion over the *pargana* (administrative division) of Bhalai, which held significant economic importance as a thriving commercial centre. With the consolidation of his authority, Prithvi Singh, the ruler of Chamba, endeavoured to resolve the longstanding Bhalai conflict by relinquishing control over the territory in exchange for a matrimonial alliance with the princess of Basohli. However, this agreement was never honoured, and its fulfilment remained elusive. Notably, a Mughal decree dated 1648 effectively settled the dispute in favour of Chamba, affirming their rightful claim over Bhalai.

³⁸ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 307

³⁹ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 307

⁴⁰ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 307

⁴¹ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 307

⁴² Although the year of Chattar Singh's birth is unknown, it could be assumed that he was born after Prithvi Singh's marriage with a Basohli princess soon after his consolidation of power in 1642 AD (Hutchison and Vogel, 307)

and established Chattargarh.^{43,44} He is primarily remembered for rejecting Aurangzeb's order in 1678 to demolish Hindu temples in Chamba.⁴⁵ Chattar Singh, in an act of defiance, adorned temples with copper gills, serving as a symbolic manifestation of his disobedience and an audacious taunt directed towards the emperor.⁴⁶ The gilt pinnacles remain to the present day on the Lakshmi Narayana Temple complex, Vamsigopala Temple, Hari Rai Temple and Chameshani⁴⁷ Temple. Nonetheless, the conduct angered Aurangzeb, who summoned the Raja to Delhi. Rather than personally approaching the court, he dispatched his younger brother Shakat Singh with Raja Raj Singh of Guler, but the party returned from Bajwara⁴⁸ for unknown reasons.^{49,50} Chamba reached the zenith of its political prowess and the pinnacle of its economic prosperity during the reign of the Chattar Singh. He successfully defeated Mirza Rezia Begh, the Mughal governor of Punjab, after forming an alliance with Guler, Basohli and Jammu.⁵¹ He died in 1690, and his son **Udai Singh** succeeded him in the same year.⁵²

Since **Udai Singh** was a minor when he ascended the throne of Chamba, Jai Singh — Chattar Singh's younger brother and wazir — was named regent and wazir to Udai Singh.⁵³ The young Udai Singh is described as intelligent and accomplished, and his reign began on a promising note. Hutchison and Vogel assert that the prosperity and triumph of Chamba during Udai Singh's early reign were a result of wazir Jai Singh's effective governance.⁵⁴ Soon after Udai Singh's succession, Raja Raj Singh of Guler died and was succeeded by his son Dalip Singh — a minor over whom Udai Singh was named guardian.⁵⁵ Utilizing Dalip Singh's minority, the Rajas of Jammu, Bhadu,

⁴³ Chattargarh developed as an important centre of Central Asian trade until it was razed by the Dogras in 1836.

⁴⁴ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 308

⁴⁵ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 308

⁴⁶ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 308

⁴⁷ Alternatively known as the Champavati Temple.

⁴⁸ Near present-day Hoshiarpur, Punjab

⁴⁹ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 308

⁵⁰ The incident does not only exhibit Chattar Singh's disregard for Mughal authority, but also solidifies Chamba's position as a regional political power.

⁵¹ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 308

⁵² Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 309

⁵³ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 309

⁵⁴ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 310

⁵⁵ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 310

and Basohli invaded Guler, and Udai Singh was enlisted for assistance.⁵⁶ He dispatched forces to Siba, Kahlur, and Mandi, and with their cooperation, drove the invaders out and returned the infant Raja to his privileges.^{57,58}

Although Udai Singh's reign began in favourable fashion, following wazir Jai Singh's death in 1696, the young Raja succumbed to temptations and was devoted to sensuous pleasures, distancing himself from his people's loyalty.⁵⁹ The state's government became increasingly disorganised and reached a rock bottom when the Raja elevated a barber, whose daughter he had fallen in love with, to the office of wazir, ceding full authority to him.⁶⁰ Finally, the officials plotted Udai Singh's assassination and decided to put his younger brother Lakshman Singh on the Chamba throne.⁶¹ Previously, Lakshman Singh had succumbed to their schemes and joined the conspirators, and a date was set for Udai Singh to hunt on the left bank of the Ravi (today known as Udaipur), around 5 kilometres from Chamba.⁶² Udai Singh, however, sensing danger, emerged from his tent, a sword in hand.⁶³ Lakshman Singh, moved by his appeal, abandoned the conspirators, and assumed a position alongside his brother.⁶⁴ On this, the officials ordered Lakshman Singh's assassination first, followed by Udai Singh's mortal wounding.⁶⁵ He died a few days later.⁶⁶

Udai Singh died in 1720 CE.⁶⁷ As he left no heir to succeed him, he was succeeded by Ugar Singh, his cousin and the son of Mahipat Singh, Chattar Singh's brother.⁶⁸

⁵⁶ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 310

⁵⁷ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 310

⁵⁸ The political alliance of Chamba and Guler has manifested in the medium of painting, as a considerable number of portraits of Guler Rajas were produced in Chamba. (Personal observation)

⁵⁹ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 310

⁶⁰ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 310

⁶¹ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 310

⁶² Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 310

⁶³ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 310

⁶⁴ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 310

⁶⁵ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 311

⁶⁶ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 311

⁶⁷ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 311

⁶⁸ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 311

Ugar Singh was appointed to the throne of Chamba with the help of Raja Dhrub Dev of Jammu.⁶⁹ It is said that the ghost of the murdered Raja Udai Singh used to haunt the Chamba palace, causing distress to Ugar Singh.⁷⁰ To lay the evil spirit, he erected a temple near the place of the murder.⁷¹ The temple is still in existence and the tax, called *Tirsera Udai Singhiana Autariana*, was collected till Chamba joined the Indian republic (Personal communication with Bhuvaneshwar Sharma).

Very much like Udai Singh, Ugar Singh was popular at first, but soon fell against favour with his officials who wanted to appoint his cousin Dalel Singh as the Raja.⁷² Resentful, Ugar Singh set fire to the town of Chamba in 1735 CE and thereafter fled up the Ravi valley. When passing through the village of Juh in Chanota, he was wounded in the thigh by a bullet fired by a local Rana. He fled to Kangra, where he soon afterwards died.⁷³

Previously, shortly after his succession, Ugar Singh had concerns about his cousin, **Dalel Singh**, son of Raghunath Singh, who was then a child dwelling with his maternal uncle in Jammu region; and upon appeal, the Mughal viceroy had Dalel Singh brought to Lahore and imprisoned.⁷⁴ As public sentiment regarding Ugar Singh shifted, the first move toward his deposition was to secure the release of Dalel Singh, which was accomplished through a *sanad* from the Mughal governor appointing Dalel Singh as the Raja of Chamba.⁷⁵ This information is considerably crucial for understanding the political power balance between the Chamba court and the Mughal throne, since it

⁶⁹ Prior to the demise of Udai Singh, a temporary appointment of Ugar Singh to the throne of Chamba was made by the court, as a means to compel Udai Singh to rectify his behavior. Subsequently, upon Udai Singh's reinstatement as the ruler, Ugar Singh, apprehensive for his life, sought refuge in Jammu, assuming the guise of an anonymous soldier. However, Ugar Singh's true identity was inadvertently revealed when he exhibited a remarkable feat of subduing a lion using a copper pot, an item he typically employed for bathing. This extraordinary accomplishment captured the attention of Raja Dhrub Deb of Jammu, who promptly identified Ugar Singh as the rightful prince of Chamba. In a show of support, Dhrub Deb facilitated Ugar Singh's marriage to a Jammu princess and provided assistance in his quest to claim the Chamba throne following Udai Singh's demise.

Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 311

⁷⁰ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 311

⁷¹ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 311

⁷² Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 311

⁷³ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 311

⁷⁴ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 311

⁷⁵ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 312

demonstrates that, notwithstanding Chattar Singh's contempt for Aurangzeb's commands, Chamba's state affairs remained heavily reliant on Mughal authority.

After securing the throne of Chamba in 1735 AD, the very first concern of Dalel Singh was to have Ugar Singh's sons (future Raja Umed Singh and his brother Mian Shamsheer Singh) imprisoned in Lahore, where they remained for thirteen years.⁷⁶ In 1748 CE, the Mughal governor of Punjab soon became familiar with the fact that **Umed Singh** was the legal successor to the Chamba throne, and a *sanad* recognising him as the Raja of Chamba was accorded, along with the help of an armed force to enable him to retake his land.⁷⁷ On being apprised of Umed Singh's approach, Dalel Singh refused to resist and surrendered the capital to Umed Singh.⁷⁸

Umed Singh ascended the throne in 1748 CE⁷⁹, during a pivotal period in Indian history. The Mughal empire was now disintegrating, the nawabs and governors of the provinces were assuming independence, and the Marathas and Afghans had launched their life-or-death struggle for India's supremacy.⁸⁰ As the paramount authorities ceased to exist, the hill chiefs took advantage of the instability that reigned and declared themselves independent, reclaiming all the territory taken by the Mughals.⁸¹ However, a shift in political authority occurred shortly thereafter, as evidenced by a letter from Ahmad Shah Durrani, dated 1762 CE, remonstrating with Umed Singh about the takeover of Chari.⁸² However, Afghan political power was never more than nominal in the highlands east of Jhelum, and Chamba appears to have maintained actual independence until around 1767 CE, when the Sikhs consolidated their hold on Punjab.⁸³

Chamba's strategic geographic location, positioned at the confluence of regional political centres such as Basohli, Nurpur, and Jammu, along with its diplomatic connections to the Mughal court, and flourishing trade relations with Central Asia,

⁷⁶ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 312

⁷⁷ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 313

⁷⁸ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 313

⁷⁹ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 313

⁸⁰ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 313

⁸¹ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 313

⁸² Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 314

⁸³ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 314

endowed the principality with a remarkable cultural renaissance. This resurgence was notably expressed through a sustained patronage of painting activities throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. As the popular subject-matter in the paintings belonging to this period was based on mythological themes, reflecting the dominant sects of Vaishnavism and Shaktism, it is important to view painting activity in the context of the socio-religious atmosphere of Chamba – including the state religion and the folk beliefs prevalent among the masses of Chamba within this timeframe (1650-1750).

3.2 Religious Background of Chamba

Hutchison and Vogel have asserted that for a period of four centuries – 12th century to 16th century – Chamba remained in a state of complete independence, until coming into active contact with other parts of the country in the 16th century, as a result of Akbar imposing control over the hill-states.⁸⁴ In the view of Ohri, this was the period in which several Brahmin families migrated to Chamba from the plains of North India.⁸⁵ Learned people were appointed to various positions in the court – including *Rajguru* and *Rajajyotishi* – during the reign of Raja Ganesh Varmana (1512—59).⁸⁶ Prince Pratap Singh Varmana, the son of Ganesh Varmana, went on pilgrimages to Haridwar, Badrinath and Kedarnath.⁸⁷ Several princes visited Haridwar in the reign of Raja Balabhadra Varmana (r. 1589 –1613,1623—41).⁸⁸ Ohri observes a result of these interactions with the outside world in the form of a copper-plate charter issued by Ganesh Varmana in 1558 CE which is free of mistakes.⁸⁹ Sanskrit texts such as Bhagavata Purana, the Harivamsa and the Durgasaptasati are quoted in copper-plate charters belonging to this period – revealing the assimilation of external influences in the regional social and cultural fabric of Chamba.

Chhabra has translated a copper-plate charter issued in the year 1591 CE by Raja Bhalabhadra Varmana, which testifies a land grant given to two Brahmins from

⁸⁴ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 296

⁸⁵ Ohri, Chamba Painting, 45

⁸⁶ Ohri, Chamba Painting, 45

⁸⁷ Chhabra, BC. 1957. *Antiquities of Chamba State, Part 2: Medieval and Later Inscriptions*. Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India; 72. 49

⁸⁸ Ohri, Chamba Painting, 45

⁸⁹ Ohri, Chamba Painting, 45

Gaya.⁹⁰ A Brahmin from South India settled in Chamba during the reign of Raja Prithvi Singh (1641—1664).⁹¹

The reconciliation of the political power of Chamba in 1641 CE following the subjugation to Nurpur for a period of 18 years is a watershed moment in the history of Chamba. This period is marked with a paradigm shift of social and cultural atmosphere at Chamba which is reflected in several cultural practices. One of the primary changes which occurred was the replacement of Sanskrit for the writing of the *vamsavali* with the vernacular – known as Chambyali.⁹² At this time the use of Sanskrit for official purpose was abandoned, and Chambyali, as spoken in the town, became the *de facto lingua franca*, a fact I observed on studying the copper-plate charters and inscriptions on paintings belonging to this period. Chambyali was written in *Devashesha*, an early form of Takri as found in copper-plate charters belonging to the mid-17th century. This transition from Sanskrit to the vernacular in all likelihood made a major impact on the society of that period, and paved way for Bhakti movement in Chamba.

Ohri has observed that vernacular poetry helped in making Vaishnavism more popular in the hills.⁹³ However, there is presence of ample evidence suggesting the existence of Vaishnavism prior to the 17th century. Vogel mentioned a 12th century inscription of Rana Nagapala in which the widowed mother of the Rana expresses her devotion towards Krishna.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, an almost sudden interest of the Chamba royal family into Krishna cult is observed by Ohri, who attributes it to the popularity of Vaishnavite literature written in the vernacular. The first Krishna temple built in Chamba town is the Vamsigopala Temple, next to the Akhand Chandi complex, raised by Raja Balabhadra Varmana.⁹⁵ Raja Prithvi Singh also installed the Raghubir idol, a sculpture made in black stone which later became the family idol of the Rajas of Chamba.⁹⁶ It is

⁹⁰ Chhabra, *Antiquities of Chamba State, Part 2: Medieval and Later Inscriptions*, 80-81

⁹¹ Chhabra, *Antiquities of Chamba State, Part 2: Medieval and Later Inscriptions*, 150-151

⁹² Ohri, *Chamba Painting*, 48

⁹³ Ohri, *Chamba Painting*, 49

⁹⁴ Vogel, J. Ph. 1911. *Antiquities of Chamba State*. Calcutta: Superintendent government printing, 209-213

⁹⁵ Ohri, *Chamba Painting*, 50

⁹⁶ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 307

said to have been obtained from Shah Jahan on one of Prithvi Singh's visits to Delhi and had originally been used as a weight in the Mughal Palace.⁹⁷

Although Vaishnavism became the religion of the royal family of Chamba, Ohri has noted that it does not account for the entire religious belief of the people of Chamba, who were chiefly devoted to Shiva and Shakti and other local deities.⁹⁸ The diversity in the various sects followed by the people could be understood by the four temples which were raised by Dai Batlo during the reign of Prithvi Singh in mid-17th century – Shiva Temple at Dwat, the Naga temple of Khajjiar, the Hidimba Devi temple at Mehla, and the Sita-Ram temple in Chamba town. This diversity is also observed in the study of the subject-matter of early Chamba painting, which include a small number of Devi and Shiva paintings, even though the subject-matter otherwise is largely Vaishnavite in nature.

In my view, while Vaishnavism held sway in Chamba during the first half of the 17th century, Prithvi Singh was brought under the foster care of Raja Hari Sen in Mandi, where Shakti and Shiva cults have remained dominant. As a result, Prithvi Singh's religious beliefs were inclined towards Shiva and Shakti, manifesting in paintings based on associated subject-matter. The observation is supported by the fact that while the Shiva temple at Dwat is ascribed to Dai Batlo by tradition, an inscription on the wall credits the construction to Prithvi Singh. Similarly, in the temple of Hidimba Devi is an inscription mentioning the name of the Raja and not of Dai Batlo. There is also a silver-plate in the temple depicting a man in the likeness of Prithvi Singh praying to the goddess. However, it is not to be considered that Prithvi Singh completely renounced Vaishnavism, as the installation of the Raghunath idol is attributed to him. A study of the religious temperament of the Rajas of Chamba reveal to us that while Vaishnavism has been the religion of the state, Rajas also have their personal inclinations. To cite an example, the woodcarvings of Chamunda Temple, Chamba, which are attributed to the reign of Raja Chattar Singh⁹⁹, are laden with imagery related

⁹⁷ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 307

⁹⁸ Ohri, Chamba Painting, 52

⁹⁹ Sharma, Sarang. 2022. "Perso-Islamic Motifs and Timurid Symbolism in the Temple Woodcarvings of Chamba, Himachal Pradesh." In *Revisiting Himalayan Borderlands: A Bridge Between India and Central Asia*, edited by T. A. Rather, M. A. Shah, and M. A. Yattoo. Jay Kay Publishers, New Delhi/Srinagar, 288

to Vaishnavite themes. I have observed several portraits of Chattar Singh in which he is depicted adorning Shakta religious markings on his forehead. However, in one portrait is depicted praying at a Vishnu shrine. A posthumous portrait of Chattar Singh reveals his inclination towards Vaishnavism at the end of his life, as suggested by the Vaishnavite tilakas. The subject-matter of painting during the reign of Chattar Singh is also chiefly Vaishnavite in nature, with the inclusion of at least two Bhagavata Purana sets and many copies of Dasavatara.

The subject-matter in vogue during the reign of Raja Udai Singh, as well as the Vaishnavite imagery in his hero-stones, hint towards his lifelong commitment towards Vaishnavism. The same could be said about Raja Dalel Singh, who built the Torana of Laxmi Narayana temple in 1747 CE. Raja Umed Singh appears to be an ardent devotee of the Goddess as he did not only construct the Devi-Kothi temple at Churah, but also had organised an uninterrupted recital of Durgasaptasati at the Chamba palace in the year 1749.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, Umed Singh's brother and wazir Shamsher Singh adhered to Vaishnavite values, a fact testified by the existence of a Bhagavata Purana set dated 1757 CE.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the walls of the Devi-Kothi temples are adorned with murals based on the exploits of the Devi, as well as episodes of Bhagavata Purana leading to the killing of Kamsa. The existence of Krishna-related murals in a Devi temple reveals to us that while the Raja had displayed affinity to the Shakta cult, Vaishnavism had not been completely abandoned and being the state religion occupied a special place even in monuments pertaining to other sects.

In the view of Ohri, the re-emergence of Vaishnavism in 17th century Chamba and its popularisation is largely credited to the appointment of Bengali Brahmin Surananda as the Rajguru of Chamba.¹⁰² He has mentioned that Rajguru Surananda, who had migrated from Banaras, had found the people of Chamba 'generally full of superstition' and had set about introducing changes.¹⁰³ The introduction of Vaishnavism, a rather uncomplicated sect which is not restrained by ritualistic worship and based on the

¹⁰⁰ Chhabra, *Antiquities of Chamba State, Part 2: Medieval and Later Inscriptions*, 161

¹⁰¹ Goswamy, B. N., and Eberhard Fischer. 1992. *Pahari Masters: Court Painters of Northern India*. Artibus Asiae, 151

¹⁰² Ohri, Chamba Painting, 45

¹⁰³ Ohri, Chamba Painting, 53

essence of love became popular among the masses and set them free from the bondage of the priestly class.

Ohri opines that the new Vaishnava wave was rather superimposed on the people of Chamba by the ruling class.¹⁰⁴ However, in my opinion, the possibility of both factors contributing equally as well as simultaneously appears valid. The propagation of Vaishnava sect was carried forth by the ruling class with the construction of new temples in the form of the Badrinath temple by Raja Pratap Singh and Vamsigopala temple by Raja Balabhadra Varmana. Hutchison and Vogel have noted that Raja Balabhadra Varmana was fondly named 'Balikarna' by the people of Chamba for his piety. The naming done after Bali and Karna, two figures belonging to the Vaishnava mythology, reveals that some familiarity with the Vaishnava legends and mythology was already shared among the masses of Chamba though they predominantly prayed to Shiva and Shakti and other local deities (personal view). It points towards the existence of an oral tradition which familiarised the largely illiterate people of Chamba with mythological stories of the Puranas.

Kathavachan, or recitation of religious stories, is a practice of which evidence has been found in the form of a copper-plate charter testifying a land grant given to Brahmin Misra Goverdhanasarman, an inhabitant of Kashi, by prince Janardan Varmana in 1619 for reciting the Harivamsa Purana.¹⁰⁵ The land grant signifies that the recitation of the Harivamsa Purana was an activity of great importance. *Kathavachaks*, or storytellers might have travelled to Chamba from distant places and led to the propagation of Vaishnavism. Vernacularisation of Sanskrit and Hindi texts resulted in the emergence of local *Kathavachaks* who could recite the legends of Puranas in Chambyali, further popularising the *Vaishanava* cults.

With the passage of time, the practice became more in vogue and recitations of Puranas became an integral part of the local religious customs, as it has continued to the present times with regular recitations of Bhagavata Purana, Shiva Purana and Durgasaptasati happening in temples across the town (personal observation). Other than playing a

¹⁰⁴ Ohri, Chamba Painting, 52

¹⁰⁵ Chhabra, *Antiquities of Chamba State, Part 2: Medieval and Later Inscriptions*, 113-115

decisive role in determining the popular subject-matter of early Chamba painting, the *Kathavachan* and vernacularisation of religious texts would have made the painters familiar with the various episodes, particularly those of the Bhagavata Purana and Durgasaptasati.¹⁰⁶

3.3 Social Background of Chamba

The population of the district according to the 2011 census is 519,080¹⁰⁷ and was numbered to be 127,834 in the 1904 State Gazetteer.¹⁰⁸ Life in Chamba was always organised along feudal lines, with the Raja standing at the head, possessing all the power and resources. The demography was predominantly Hindu, of which the nobility and the priestly Brahmin caste remained the most privileged. The second class chiefly comprised of the trading caste, followed by peasantry, then artisans and the lowest in the social order were the classes providing menial or essential services.

The planning of the town of Chamba is done in a manner that it reflects the social structure well. The town is in the shape of a triangle, spread over two terraces. The upper terrace (in the east) is known as 'Uparla Sheher' (upper town) and is principally occupied by the royal palace and its gardens, walled on the four sides. The palatial campus is surrounded by temples and the houses of the nobility and the priests.

The Uparla Sheher is comprised of neighbourhoods named – Surara, Drobhi, Bangotu, Chauntra, Kharura, Ramgarh and Hatnala. The dwellers of the upper terrace are strictly Brahmins and Rajputs, and families belonging to the Khatri community that formed a large part of the nobility of the bygone era. Families of royal priests, astrologers, physicians, and cooks belong to the Brahmin caste, whereas the Rajputs, other than the descendants of the Rajas and the Wazirs, largely comprise of mercenaries, royal guards, and descendants of the ruling families of Kangra, Nurpur, Jammu and

¹⁰⁶ A detailed and elaborate account of the themes and subject-matter of Chamba painting is given in Chapter 4

¹⁰⁷ "District Census Handbook - Chamba." Accessed December 9, 2021.

https://censusindia.gov.in/2011census/dchb/0201_PART_A_DCHB_CHAMBA.pdf.

¹⁰⁸ Rose, H.A. 1904. *Punjab States Gazetteer Volume XXII A: Chamba State*. Civil and Military Gazette Press, Lahore, 1.

Kishtawar, as suggested by their surnames – Katoch, Pathania, Jamwal, Charak, Jasrotia, Jandarotia, and Kishtawaria.

The Brahmins and the Rajputs are also in possession of land in distant villages that were given as grants by the former Rajas. Around 150 copper plate charters testifying land grants have been found, most of which are in the possession of the Brahmins. The temples of Chamba town are mainly concentrated in this area, being about 50 in number¹⁰⁹. No families – belonging to the Muslim faith or the lower castes – can be found in the upper terrace.

The town bazaar and the polo ground separate the lower terrace to the west of the royal palace. The demography of the lower terrace predominantly comprises of traders, peasants, artisans, craftsmen, and menial workers. Unlike the ‘Uparla Sheher’, there is no collective term for the downtown area, and the neighbourhoods are known by their separate names – Dharog, to the south of the polo ground, is inhabited by cordwainers, ironsmiths, woodworkers; Kashmiri Mohalla¹¹⁰, to the west of the polo ground, is inhabited by Muslim families (largely belonging to the peasantry class), goldsmiths, locksmiths, horologists, traders and artisans; and Pakka Tala, to the north of the polo ground, is inhabited by the Valmikis. Only one ancient temple – the Hari Rai temple – exists in the lower terrace of the town.

Two historical gates were put up near the Laxmi Narayana temple, restricting the movement of people from the lower terrace towards the upper terrace, suggestive of the social and economic superiority of the dwellers of the upper terrace to the lower terrace (personal communication with Bhuvaneshwar Sharma, descendant of the family of royal cooks and a retired Patwari by profession). The rigid and inflexible caste system determined the profession of the people, which was essentially hereditary in nature.

¹⁰⁹ Ohri, Chamba Painting, 61

¹¹⁰ The name seems to be of modern origins. Bhuvaneshwar Sharma has pointed out that the name came to existence due to a considerable Muslim population that lived in the area. However, it shares no cultural or historical connections to the region of Kashmir.

The inhabitation of craftsmen and artisans including tinkerers, sculptors, woodcarvers, carpenters, and painters has historically been in the lower terrace, suggestive of their social and economic standing. As a result of it, these would generally form matrimonial ties amongst themselves (personal observation). It is maintained by the descendants of one painter family in Chamba that their ancestors were Brahmins of the Manikantha *gotra*, tracing their origin to Gujarat (personal communication with Hansraj Dhiman, a descendant of the Manikantha painter family), a fact supported by the *bahis* at Haridwar.¹¹¹ However, today the family is considered Dhiman, an artisan caste that is categorised under the Government of India's Other Backward Class (OBC).¹¹² Similar is the case of the descendants of the Guler painter Nainsukh, who were patronised by Raja Raj Singh of Chamba (r. 1764—94) and given land in the village of Rajol¹¹³, where members of the family are still residing. The family surname is 'Raina', which is a Brahmin caste of Kashmiri origin, but members of the family can only marry among Dhimans (personal communication with Anil Raina, a descendant of Nainsukh).

In my view, the change in caste took place due to the choice of profession, which was taken by the painters. As these families migrated to Chamba from different locations, they must have preserved their original caste identity¹¹⁴. However, they appear to have been treated as artisans by the Raja as – firstly, the allocation of land which was made by the Rajas did not place them in the upper terrace, unlike the priestly Brahmins who were migrating from Kashi and Banaras; and secondly, since the painters used animal glue – formed with the collagen from skins, bones and tendons of horses – it made them appear lower in status to the clergy and the nobility of Chamba (personal opinion). The involvement of miniaturists trained in the Popular Mughal tradition starts becoming evident in the woodcarvings of this period, which would have led to the coining of the term *tarkhan-chitere*, or painter-carpenters.

¹¹¹ Goswamy and Fischer, *Pahari Masters: Court Painters of Northern India*, 129

¹¹² National Commission for Backward Classes. "State/UT-wise List of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the State of Himachal Pradesh." Accessed December 9, 2021. <http://ncbc.nic.in/Writereaddata/cl/himachal.pdf>.

¹¹³ Hutchison, J., and Vogel, J. Ph. *History of The Panjab Hill States: Vol. I*, 311

¹¹⁴ The names of the members of the Manikanth painter family as recorded in the Haridwar Bahis appear upper caste, as well as foreign to the vernacular tradition of Chamba.

However, the painter must have certainly enjoyed a higher status among his associates and equivalent craftsmen. Logically, his regular visits to the royal palace to record portraits of the Rajas and the nobility would have made him a person of certain significance among the weavers, tinkers, and jewellers. Correspondingly, following the mid-17th seventeenth century, painting emerges as the most popular form of art in the North-Western Himalayas, partly due to its portability, rate of production, lower cost of manufacture, and easy accessibility; and partly due to its appeal as the latest cultural trend that took a large portion of the region under its sway within a few decades¹¹⁵. As a result, the rise of the painting activity resulted in the fall of other practices including sculpture and architecture. The painter, plausibly, remained greatly in demand, and hence, the opportunities that this career promised must have led several craftsmen to give up their trade and become painters instead. This hypothesis thus appears to be among the primary factors responsible for the wide variety of stylistic diversity that is observed in the painting tradition of Chamba between mid-17th and mid-18th century.

As discussed in the chapter, while the difficult terrain of Chamba guarded it from invasions, and its strategic geographic location between political centres made it suitable for trade, the political stability and financial affluence of the state during mid-17th to mid-18th centuries allowed the Rajas to wholeheartedly patronize art. The commission of paintings based on the Vaishnavite subject-matter fairly demonstrates the religious inclination of the ruling family. The status of the painter in the then-urban society of Chamba, as well as his position among the other craftsmen of the town, influenced not only painting but other art forms of the region, which is explored in the following chapters of the present research.

¹¹⁵ Collaboration of painters with other artisans is discussed in Chapter 6