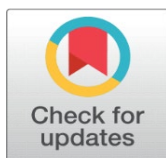


GANGAVATARAN THEME ON CHAMBA RUMAL

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ABSTRACT

The needle art or embroidery was the famous time pass of Indian woman folk. Many of these home-grown techniques have taken a place in the larger canvass of Indian art. Chamba *rumal* of Himachal Pradesh is one of them. It is narrative theme & technique and commands a special place in the Indian embroidery world. Chamba *rumal* is embroidered on off white cotton cloth with untwisted silk threads. Although we find two styles of embroidery in the Chamba valley, the classical one is the style famous in the art world with the name of Chamba *Rumal*. The classical style of the embroidery was developed under the patronage of Royal families of the Himachal Pradesh. This embroidery style and Pahadi painting developed parallel to each other. This is the reason that the scenes depicted on these Rumals have striking similarity with Pahadi paintings. There are many examples showing the likeness and similar theme between Chamba rumals and Pahadi Paintings. A Chamba *rumal* with *Gangavartaran* theme alike to the Pahadi painting is in the collection of Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum in Banaras Hindu University. This has the depiction of the famous story of Holy River Ganga's flow from heaven to the earth on the request of King Bhagirath who did much of penance & austerities to bring Ganga on earth to get salvation for his forefathers.

Keywords: Embroidery, Narrative Theme, Royale Families, Classical Style, Pahadi Painting, Gangavataran, Holy River

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. IMPORTANCE OF GANGA IN INDIAN LIFE

The river Ganges has a very special place in the Indian religion and culture. It is considered a Holy River which has come to the earth as a divine boon. Ganges is synonymous with life, religion, faith, history, culture, and spirituality. This River connects different cultures of the Indian society. It is not only a life giver for the Indian public, but they strongly believe that it also gives salvation by freeing one from the cycle of life and death. In fact, Ganga is the lifeline for Indian people in the true sense. Although there is no recorded or authentic version of emergence of Ganga, there is a strong belief that it has emerged from the heaven on the earth. The earliest Indian scripture, *Rigveda* gives precedence to Ganga and Yamuna over other

rivers. The story of emergence of holy Ganges is mentioned in many Indian scriptures and literatures in different ways. Ganga is called as *Janhavi*, *Shubhra*, *Sapteshwari*, *Nikita*, *Bhagirathi*, *Alaknanda*, *Vishnupadi* and many other names in the different literatures.

The river Ganga has been personified as a Goddess and is worshipped by Hindus across India and has a strong presence in every segment of Indian life. Be it a myth, legend, Art, Literature, Folktales or Folklores, this river appears as a unifying theme of Indian life. It has the fathomless belief & faith of Indian people and has sustained the soul of India in its long journey through unfathomed passage of time.

1.2. GANGA IN THE INDIAN ART

This is the reason that along with the literatures, Ganga finds expansion in various forms of art too. In fact, Ganga has been depicted very beautifully and effectively in painting, sculpture, terracotta, coins, textiles, as well as all other mediums of art-expression. The earliest depiction of the Ganges is noticed on a seal found at Mohenjo-Daro, where it has been shown with Yamuna and other rivers of the Punjab [Tandon \(1986\)](#). The theme of the Ganges has been portrayed with utmost reverence in the periods of nearly all the ruling dynasties irrespective of religious beliefs, sects, and regions. Along with the mentioning in *Rigveda*, there are many other legends surrounding Ganga. The *Bhagavata purana* tells us the story of the birth of the Ganges. *Vamanavatar* is considered to be the one of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. When he formed himself as a dwarf like Brahmin to defeat the Demon King Bali. It is said that when Lord Vishnu as Vamana extended his feet to measure the universe, his big toe inadvertently pierced the end portion of the universe and made a hole there. Through this hole, the holy water entered as the river Ganga which finally descended on earth after the request of King Bhagiratha to Lord Brahma. The Ganges was initially held captive in the hair locks of Lord Shiva, in order to prevent destruction of the earth by sheer force of it. After controlling the force and the velocity in these locks, she was released from the head of Shiva to flow on the earth. This whole story of Ganges coming on the earth became popularly known as *Gangavataran*.

This great story of *Gangavataran* encapsulated in legends became popular in Indian life and Indian Art as well. A magnificent example of this is found in the open-air rock relief at Mahabalipuram, Madras. This is a sculpture of the 7th century A.D. made in the Pallava period [Goswami \(1956\)](#). As an art subject, it extended from stone to miniature paintings, and from paintings to the famous embroidered Chamba handkerchief of Himachal Pradesh. The Chamba *Rumal* based on *Gangavataran* is noteworthy from the viewpoint of the theme; because in the Indian textile tradition, this subject has hardly been depicted in any other medium.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CHAMBA RUMAL

The most distinctive and unique feature of Chamba *Rumals* is the likeness and similitude between Pahadi paintings (miniature and mural painting) and the *Rumals*. This is very difficult to determine the beginning of the tradition of ornamentation based on Pahadi paintings on the *Rumals*. While it is believed that the Pahadi paintings came into light somewhere in the 3rd quarter of the 16th century, the emergence of *Rumals* influenced by this Painting style begun to be made towards the end of this century [Sharma \(2005\)](#).

This splendid piece of embroidery art became popular as the “*Painting made by needle*” [Karmrisch \(1939\)](#). Earlier, it was made in the entire areas of Himanchal

Pradesh, i.e., *Basohli, Kangra, Mandi, Kullu, Jammu, Bilaspur, Nurpur, Guler, Hoshiarpur*, etc. But later on, this art got limited to the Chamba region [Anand \(1954\)](#), thus became popular as Chamba *Rumal* [Bhattacharya \(1968\)](#). The custom of this style of *Rumals* begun in Chamba between 1782 and 1828 AD. All the excellent specimens of this classical style of *Rumal* embroidery are from the Chamba region.

During the rule of Ummed Singh (1748-1764 AD) in 18th century [Bhattacharya \(1968\)](#), the art & architecture in Chamba got a distinctive dimension. The Chamba style of art achieved new heights in the regime of his successor Raj Singh (1764-1794 AD) [Goetz \(1969\)](#). The patronage of Royals made it very popular, and it also affected the local style of embroidery. This was the time when the folk style of embroidery took a sophisticated turn and emerged as a *Rumal* art [Handa \(1998\)](#). The successive rulers of Chamba, Raja Jeet Singh (1794-1808 AD), Raja Charat Singh (1808-1844 AD) and Raja Shri Singh (1844-1870 AD) continued patronizing this art, and it got more refined in these regimes [Gopinatha \(1968\)](#). Most of the existing articles and *Rumals* are from these regimes in nineteenth century. [Kaur \(2017\)](#)

Whether folk or classical, both the styles of Chamba *Rumal* have the subject of *Raslila* of Shri Krishna with Radha and the Gopi's. Other than this, *Rukmini-Vivah, Ram-Sita, Shiva-Parvati, Vishnu-Hanuman*, along with many other common subjects, floral ornamentation, and geometric shapes are also depicted on them. But in the art world, those *rumals* of classical style are more famous, which have the mythological stories inspired by the Pahadi painting style made on them. They had depictions of the stories that were prevalent in the Pahadi style of painting, such as the story of the descent of the Ganges, also known as Bhagirathi and *Gangavataran*. This story is mentioned in the great *Puranas* of India. The story of Ganga's descent on earth at the request of King Bhagiratha is also described in *Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana, and Ramayana* [Gopinatha \(1968\)](#). This scene depicts origin of the ancient river Ganges, which descended to the earth from the Himalayas in a great deluge.

Ganga is not a simple earthly river for the Indians, it is by a special grace that it flows from heaven on the earth. For them, she is the heavenly stream brought to the earth by the persistent efforts of the many generation of King Sagara's family. Ganga is said to be the stream, acting as the steps of the staircase leading to the heaven for the sons of King Sagara, who were reduced to ashes by Rishi Kapila.

The story of Ganga flowing to earth starts with the *Ashvamedh Yagya* performed by King Sagara, who is said to have sixty thousand sons, all of whom were wicked and involved in every kind of evil activities. This *Ashvmedha Yagya* got the Gods very worried, as successful completion of the *Yagya* would have made King Samara's clan more powerful. Thus Indra, King of the Gods, stole the horse and tied it in the netherworld (*Patala-loka*). The sixty thousand sons of King Sagara traced the horse in the netherworld at the hermitage of Rishi Kapila and misbehaved with him. Rishi Kapila turned them in ashes with his power. It is said that the grandson of King Sagara went in the search of the horse and his uncles and landed at the same hermitage. Rishi Kapila was very pleased with his behaviour and blessed him. He told him that if the holy water of Ganga is sprinkled on the ashes of his uncles, they will get salvation and go to the heaven. He also blessed him with the words that they will go to the heaven in the lifetime of his grandson. This is a strong belief that his grandson King Bhagiratha performed many austerities to bring down the celestial river Ganga on the earth. Ganga blessed his penance and agreed to come to the earth. But she told Bhagiratha that her immediate fall from heaven would cause the destruction of earth, and questioned her that who will bear the enormous force of her descent? King Bhagiratha again went for penance and pleased Lord Rudra with

his austerities, who received Ganga in Himalaya and toned down her force by winding her in the labyrinth of his locks of hair for a long time before her fall. Ganga was thus humbled by Lord Shiva, who let her then flow on the earth. King Bhagiratha then led Ganga to the ashes of his ancestors and made them attain salvation by the contact of the holy river. As Lord Shiva has Ganga on his mighty head, he is also known as Gangadharmurti.

3. GANGAVATARAN THEME ON CHAMBA RUMAL

The scene is depicted in one of the *Chamba Rumal* stored at Bharat Kala Bhawan [Plate 1](#). This *Chamba Rumal* with the illustration of the story of *Gangavataran* or the descent of Ganga on the earth, is a very beautiful example of the classical *Rumal* of the *Pahadi* style. Lord Shiva and Mother Parvati are depicted in the sitting position in the middle of the *Rumal*, while *Nandi*, the ride of Shiva has been made a little lower from them. King Bhagiratha is depicted with folded hands and standing on one leg before Lord Shiva, while the Holy Ganges is shown coming out of the Shiva's hair locks and falling on the earth in front of King Bhagiratha. There is also a tree in the backdrop of Shiv-Parvati. This whole scene narrates the story of *Gangavataran*, where Lord Shiva welcomed the heavenly river Ganga in the Himalaya, who descended on the earth due to the severe penance performed by the King Bhagiratha. To reduce the thrust and speed of Ganga, Shiva allowed her to flow on the earth only after reducing its velocity by receiving her on his head and passing her through the labyrinth of his hair locks. In this sample, Lord Shiva is shown sitting on a tiger-skin with Mother Parvati. The picture depicts Mother Parvati wearing *lehenga* and *choli*, while Lord Shiva has wrapped a tiger skin on the lower part of his body. Shiva is depicted with the snake wrapped around his neck and a trident in his hand. King Bhagiratha is shown wearing a dhoti on the lower part of his body, and a drape around his shoulder [Plate 2](#).

Plate 1



Plate 1 Gangavataran, Chamba Rumal, 19th century, Cotton with silk Threads, Size 61x 58cm. Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum, BHU, Acc No.1753(2005.9)

Plate 2



Plate 2 Gangavataran, Chamba Rumal, 19th century, Cotton with silk Threads, Size 61x 58cm. Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum, BHU, Acc No.1753(2005.9)

This scene of *Gangavataran* embroidered on this *Rumal* is encircled with the floral vine, consisting of traditional five-petals of Chamba style on intervals. Green leaves have been made to fill the gap between two five-petal motifs. The four corners inside the enclosed surface, and the empty ground on it, are filled with ornamentation of flowers and leaves. This whole scene is embroidered on a cotton cloth with non-twisted shiny silk threads, which are popularly known as "*pat*" in the local language. The embroiderer has used double stitch to make the scene, so that the effect of the embroidery is uniform on both sides of the *Rumal*, and the scene emerges evenly on both the surface of the cloth. Embroidery threads, especially black threads, have protruded from many places, thus the underline beneath them is clearly visible. The fine and balanced lines of this drawing indicate that they are made by a skilled artist. It is clear that while the drawing has been done by a skilled artist, the colour-combination is purely the choice of the embroiderer. For example, the embroiderer has used green colour to make Nandi, which is very unnatural colour for an Ox; King Bhagiratha has also been shown with green beard, and the absence of appropriate colours at other places too indicate that the embroiderer has done the colour combination according to his imagination [Plate 3](#). However, such subtle and lovely colours have been used in the picture composition, that they make the *Rumal* very attractive.

Plate 3

Plate 3 Gangavataran, Chamba Rumal, 19th century, Cotton with silk Threads, Size 61x 58cm. Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum, BHU, Acc No.1753(2005.9)

The selection of colours and the quality of embroidery in the figures shows it to be influenced by the folk style. Just like Pahadi style, the tradition of making Bangadwari¹³ in Chamba was in trend also, in which the paintings of gods and goddesses were made by the artists on the door of the local people on the auspicious functions, such as weddings. The *Rumal* shows that probably on one of such occasion, the painter made the drawing on the insistence of the embroiderer. But due to the absence of any example of the original Pahadi drawing, the embroidery artist used colour of the threads of own understanding. It is also right to say this because a Pahadi miniature painting similar to this theme and style is found in the collection of Bharat Kala Bhawan, Banaras Hindu University.

4. GANGAVATARAN THEME IN PAHARI PAINTING

Interestingly, a Kangra style miniature painting in the Bharat Kala Bhavan's collection also has the illustration of Gangavataran. [Plate 4](#)

Lord Shiva and Parvati are shown seated on a secluded spot in Kailasha Mountain. The sitting is picturesque and romantic. The forepart of Shiva's mount Nandi is shown through the rocks. Ganga comes out from Shiva's matted locks with a sweeping movement and falls down in the form of a tortuous rivulet. Bhagiratha is shown in the form of a tortuous rivulet. Bhagiratha is shown standing on one foot with folded hands. He looks up in reverence and appears to be relieved on the release of the sacred river from the locks of Shiva. He had prayed to Ganga for years, as a result of which his hair and beard has turned grey. He is shown standing one legged on an *asana*. His *Kamandal* is placed on it. A covered manuscript is seen pressed under his armpit. A few tiny figures of divine beings and musicians are shown in the sky against clouds. They are rejoicing at the release of Ganga from the locks of Shiva. The

treatment of trees is very fine, the rocks are extremely stylized, and are found to be arranged schematically. The blue and white horizon, the brown backdrop of white hill, the green trees have all been very judiciously distributed and thereby turned the landscape beautiful.

Plate 4



Plate 4 Gangavataran, C.1785-1800 A.D., Pahari School, Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum, BHU, Acc No. 5291

5. CONCLUSION

Embroidery has its limits, the ease with which a brush can make trees, plants and mountains etc. is not possible with a needle, yet the lines made on this handkerchief with charcoal, and the similarity of the subject matter marked on the miniature picture proves that the Pahari painters who used to paint these scenes, and the painter who did the sketch on the cloths, are from the same school of art. That was the time when Royals used to patron the art and artists, and undoubtedly, the easy availability of painters in the palace influenced the royal ladies. It was on their request that the painters agreed to draw on *Rumals*. This fusion of artists and embroiderers brought this style of embroidery art at par with the Pahadi paintings.

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