

Tracing the Historical Roots of Various Cultural Influences on Dogra Folk-Paintings and Traditions

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Abstract

Paintings, sculpture, music, literature and other arts are often considered to be the repository of a society's collective memory. Art and Paintings in this sense is communication providing incentive to communicate with each other via images, sounds and stories. The land of Dogras also called as Duggar is rich in its heritage in terms of its unique culture comprising of the various components from the time immemorial. The development of Dogra School of painting is one of them, known all over the world for its creative art forms. Folk art is the result of strong religious faith, love for beauty and lovely imagination, which, no doubt, are found among the people of a particular culture. Dogra wall paintings are located in the outer Himalayan range of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The main centres for these paintings are the valleys of Jammu, Udhampur, Doda, Basmoli, Poonch. The rulers of these small hill states lived in serenely beautiful terrain. The boundaries and political alignments of the region were constantly in flux. The continuous trading and political interaction with the Kashmir valley as well as this hill region of Jammu was also in close contact with other hill states of the western Himalaya. Since the ruling clans of Himachal Pradesh also come from the plains, there were strong social and cultural ties between the Dogra rajas and those of Himachal Pradesh. This paper is an attempt to understand the process of acculturation depicted in the folk paintings and traditions of Dogra cross-cultural society. As such inter-cultural contacts had resulted in both cultural and social change in Dogra folk art and traditions.

Keywords: Dogras, Folk-Paintings, Traditions, Cultural influences, Acculturation

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Introduction

Folk art is a term used to describe the works of art that has long been a storehouse of indigenous knowledge and had been passed through the generations. Artists have created the best works possible with the use of material and technology available to them in each generation. The Dogra Folk paintings of Basmoli and adjoining areas of Kathua district are famous for unique style of Paintings depicting the fusion of Hindu mythology with Mughal miniature techniques and folk art of local hills. The development of Dogra School of painting is one of them, known all over the world for its creative art forms. Folk art is the result of strong religious faith, love for beauty and lovely imagination, which, no doubt, are found among the people of a particular culture. Dogra wall paintings are located in the outer Himalayan range of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The main centres for these paintings are the valleys of Jammu, Udhampur, Doda, Basmoli, Poonch. The Basmoli Chitra Kala, also known as Basmoli paintings has made a significant contribution in folk art. The art is first mentioned in the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) for the years 1918-19. Basmoli school of Paintings is of pre-Mughal origin. Coomaraswami mistaken these works as Dogra school of art painting. Many scholars believe that Basmoli paintings are quite similar to the

paintings of Udaipur and Gujarat. In cross-cultural society, one of the major sources of development and change in human behaviour is the contact between various cultures, known as 'Acculturation'. Such inter-cultural contacts result in both cultural and social change and it is crucial for the scholars working in this area to define the impact and significance of a particular kind of expression on folk art.

Raja Ranjit Dev Reign (1733-1781) and Emergence of Tradition of Folk-Paintings and Various Cultural Influences

Dogras refers to the people who speak the Dogri language, one of the many western Pahari languages spoken in the Jammu region as well as parts of Himachal Pradesh. In the 17th century the region was ruled by a number of petty Dogra chieftains, one of whom was the founder of the Dogra or Jamwal dynasty of Jammu and Kashmir. It was Raja Hari Dev (1656-1692) who conquered neighbouring principalities and turned Jammu into a prominent kingdom. According to the Rajdarshani, a historical account of the Jammu region written by 19th century historian Ganeshdas Badenra. It was Raja Hari Dev's grandson Raja Dhruv Dev (1707-1733) who moved his residence from the old palace in the Purani Mandi area of Jammu, to a new, more spectacular location overlooking the Tawi river, which is today called Mubarak Mandi. Over the years, the palace grew as additions were made. New palaces were constructed during the reign of his son and successor Raja Ranjit Dev (1733-1781 CE). In the eighteenth century the rulers were more focussed and were the ardent patrons of art and literature. In this century the various other regions of the area including Punjab were unfavourable for the creative emergence of artists and poets and for any remarkable literary activity. Due to these circumstances artists and literary men took asylum in the courts of hill chiefs because they got better environment in mountains, where the life was secure and peaceful. But when we look at Jammu it already had an established tradition of enhanced royal patronage to scholars and poets, artists, and painters. The reign of Raja Ranjit Dev was particularly notable as a resort for merchants, refugees, artists and poets, the only heaven for artists and poets laid in the territories of Maharaja Ranjit Dev.ⁱ Ranjit Dev ruled Jammu from 1723 to 1783 and had 22 Dogra chieftains under him. During his rule, Jammu was considered an important trading centre of North India. Maharaja Ranjit Dev sought to bring Chamba under his sway during the minority of Raj Singh, Raja of Chamba. In 1775 he deputed army under Raja Amrit Pal of Basholi to invade Chamba. A large portion of Churah, the northern province of Chamba, was overrun. But Raja Raj Singh, with the help of Ramgarhia Sardars drove out the invading force. However, Maharaja Ranjit Dev is credited to have conquered all 22 hilly states, eleven in Kangra area across river Ravi and the rest eleven states on the western side of river Ravi (Hutchison & Vogel, 542).ⁱⁱ

Maharaja Ranjit Dev also acquired a jagir in Kashmir for Rs.1, 25,000 annually. Maharaja Ranjit Dev granted jagirs to his brothers, he granted jagir of Bhalwalta in Udhampur to his younger brother Ghansar Dev, jagir of Surinsar to Balwant Dev and the jagir of Dhansal to his third brother Surat Singh. He also gave important positions to men from his own clan like Mian Ajmat Dev, Mian Isher Dev, Mian Tegh Singh, Mian Mana Singh etc. Maharaja Ranjit Dev also established cordial relations with other Rajput clans such as Ramgarhia, Raipuria, Ganjuria, Panjoria, Kanhachakiya, Panjgrainwalia, Jandiwalia, Hantal, Chibbal, Jandria etc. He also married in some of these Rajput clans and cemented his relations with them. He also recruited the young men from Rajput clans of Salathia, Manhas, Sambyal, Jasrotia and Charak in his army and also gave promotions to encourage them. In this way Maharaja Ranjit Dev gave respectful positions to people from all Rajput clans in his durbar and army. In this way he got full support from all Rajput clans which made his reign peaceful and prosperous (Nirmohi, 47)ⁱⁱⁱ His period is called the golden period of Dogra rule. He died in 1781 A.D after ruling for 46 years including 12 years in confinement of Nawab of Lahore. During Ranjit Dev's reign the town of Jammu acquired great prosperity. The confusion and disorder in plains diverted trade to the hills, and many wealthy merchants sought asylum or established branch firms in Jammu for safety and security. To all alike, Hindu or Muslim, the Raja extended a welcome and his capital grew and flourished (Hutchison & Vogel, 542-546).^{iv} He had two sons from his two queens. The elder was named Bajraj Dev whereas the younger was called Daleel Dev (Ram, 44). After the death of Maharaja Ranjit Dev, his elder son Raja Bajraj Dev ascended the throne. He ruled for about five years and died in a battle with the Sikhs. His queen performed sati and their one year old child Sampuran Dev was made the Raja

under the guardianship of Mian Mota (Hutchison & Vogel, 549).^v Mian Mota was the second son of Surat Singh, who was the real brother of Maharaja Ranjit Dev. Raja Sampuran Dev died at the young age of 11 years in 1797 A.D. His uncle Daleel Dev had died earlier during a battle at Lahore. So Jeet Singh son of Daleel Dev ascended the throne (Diwan, 44).^{vi} He was a weak Raja and could not control the situation and disturbances started in the state. Mian Mota who was looking after the affairs of state of Jammu during the reign of minor Raja Sampuran Dev, continued to do so even after the death of Raja Sampuran Dev. During these years Sikhs had consolidated their position in Punjab (Ram, 52).^{vii} In 1808 A.D Maharaja Ranjit Singh sent his army to annex Jammu. A great battle took place near Gumat, which was then a forest area. In this battle Gulab Singh son of Kishore Singh, who later on became Maharaja of State of Jammu & Kashmir, exhibited great courage and bravery. Raja Ranjit Dev succeeded Dhruv Dev in 1733 and continued the expansionist policy of his father. He formed the most stable government and was the most notable ruler of Jammu before Maharaja Gulab Singh.

Raja Dhruv Dev had four sons named, Ranjit Dev, Ghansar Singh, Surat Singh, Balwant Singh. Raja Ranjit Dev being the eldest one become the ruler of Jammu. When Ranjit Dev took to throne, the political conditions were passing through the most critical situation. At that time Kashmir was under the direct rule of Afghans from 1752-1819 A.D and ultimately it was occupied by Maharaja Ranjit Singh. When Raja Ranjit Dev became the ruler, he inherited Jammu which had Basholi and Jasrota as its tributaries. Also the ruler of Jammu had the authority to look into the affairs of Bhaderwah, Chamba and Nurpur. He even plundered the town of Sialkot, Chenab and even attacked the forts of Kotli and Minawar etc. In the closing years of his regime, Ranjit Dev took conquest of Kashmir valley because of the tyrannical rule of the autonomous governor Hajji Karim Khan. In addition to the Hill states, many adjoining tracts of Punjab formed part of his kingdom, these include Daulatnagar, Alamgarh etc. Ranjit Dev had also inherited from his ancestors 24 taluqas of Shakargarh and Gurdaspur tehsils. Though one can find scanty of evidences on Ranjit Dev's system of administration, yet contemporary writers have showered praises on him for his wise administration, paternal character, ethical values and religious tolerance. He was a ruler who was noted for justice and impartiality. He showed interest in social reforms and is said to have imposed a ban on the evil practice of Sati and was also against female infanticide. The Dogra rule maintained peace and harmony in his kingdom and established Jammu Dar-ul-Aman. The Raja was religious tolerant and even encouraged Muslim population to settle in Jammu. During the early part of Raja Ranjit Dev's reign coins were struck in the name of the Mughal emperor of Delhi.^{viii}

During the pre-Mughal period there was also the evidence of existence of this type of art and paintings. In the later centuries this primitive school of paintings, probably developed into Jammu-Basholi school of Dogra paintings. The emergence of this new school of paintings in the Dogra hills was caused by the prevailing political conditions in Delhi and Punjab plains as well as the puritanical ideals of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. After Aurangzeb the invasion of Nadir Shah in 1793 impoverished both the treasury as well as the Mughal nobility; due to these circumstances most of the artist and painters were, therefore, driven to the courts of hills chiefs, where they could find both security and patronage. The hill rajas were too glad to welcome them. "It is very likely that during the last ten years of the reign of Sang ram pal (1635-73 of Basholi) some artists migrated to Basholi from Delhi."^{ix}

As early as 1916 Coomaraswamy has recognised the Dogra school or Jammu school and included those paintings which really came from Basholi, Guler, Haripur, etc. First of all Ajit Gosh recognised in 1925 a distinct Basholi School of painting, but he declared it a pre-Mughal. S.N, Gupta also considered it of pre-Mughal existence. After five years of research and study of hill paintings M.S. Randhawa came to the conclusion: "It seems that the style of paintings was prevalent throughout the hills of Punjab-Jammu before the Kangra style matured. Both the styles of painting flourished side by side for some time." It has been noted that the existing miniature paintings of the Dogra region evolved during the period, when this area came in contacts with Mughals. There are two possible explanations for this, first, that pahari rajas on their visits to the Mughal courts at Lahore, Agra and Delhi came to be known of the miniatures being painted, and wished to emulate their political suzerains as patrons of art. Portraits of Dhruv Dev and Anant Dev of Jammu done by the Mughal artist Tek Chand exist in the Johnson

collection of the India office library, and a painting of Raja Basu, done at the time of Jahangir, is in the Lahore fort. These two instances indicate that the pahari rajas definitely came in contact with mughal painting. The second possibility is that a long-established artistic tradition, particularly in mural painting, existed in this region and the easy availability of paper under mughal rule prompted the painting of miniatures on a large scale. The Basholi style of paintings is considered as the original and highly matured school which evolved in the Dogra hills and afterwards spread to the centres like Jammu, Mankot, Bhaderwah, Jasrota, Nurpur, Chamba, Mandi, Guler, and Kulu. Due to certain resemblances of Basholi school with the Rajasthan kalam, the former has been considered an offshoot of the latter. In the words of M.S. Randhawa: "The Basholi style arose as a result of the marriage of the folk art of the hills with Mughal techniques." The resemblance of the Basholi and Udaipur styles was, therefore, due to evolution from a common source.^x

Dogra Folk –Paintings and Symbolism Depicting Different Folk-Traditions

The paintings of the Jammu region reveal that Dogras were the dominant social groups with high articulated life-style. In spite of the fact that the paintings explore clearly the economic life and the cultural contacts of the Jammu people, they also importantly summarize the social life of the people. Due to lack of literary sources of the history of the region, the paintings are important sources of the political, social, and economic history of the region. The painters selected the themes from the social life of the people of Jammu region including habits, food, achievements both political and military, standard of living, religion etc. However, in these paintings the idea of societal developments which was in the mind of Dogra rulers have superbly been portrayed by the artists, when political elite introduced certain irrigation facilities in the area as a source of agricultural development to improve the economic conditions of the people. The ceremonial scenes like marriages, festival occasions, etc displayed the trends among the rulers, princess, economic elite, saints, females, sinners, commoners and the maid servants.^{xi} The fact is that the Dogra society is almost ritualistic has been discussed with reference to the different customs, rituals beliefs connected with birth of a child, marriage, marriage related customs as well as rituals related with death of an individual in the form of Dogri folk art and paintings. The various schools of Dogra paintings preserve a visual and pictorial record of a social order. These paintings shows the Raja, as well as the 'Rank', princes and nobles, plebeians and farmers, mendicants and householders, soldiers and generals, men and women of all classes, lovers and beloveds in all stages and conditions of love life. These paintings offer visual representation of the dresses worn by princes, nobles and emotions cherished by the people so painted. These tells us of all the architectural styles, fashions in dress and ornaments, houses the people lived in. Though colour symbolism depicting love of the gopis for Krishna, the Basholi artists expressed the spiritual ideals of the soul's yearning for union with God. "Above all they tell us of the ideals which inspired the Hindus-the rulers, the common people, the poets as well as the painters." "In fact the Basholi artists have represented in a tangible and expressive form the entire material and spiritual texture of the life of the Hindus in the western Himalayas in the 17th and early 18th centuries in their paintings."^{xii}

Folk art and symbols can be traced back to the origin of tribes. The ultimate joy which they get after symbolising a tree as a tribal god, a mount, a mount as the godly figure fills them with a robust force and a unique vitality. The need of the tribal society for joy is immensely satisfied through their symbolised world, which the urbanities are unable to comprehend and commend.^{xiii} Almost everyone is related to ceremonial sacred places, named as 'Dehries'. The very history of these sacred places reveals that these 'Deheries' are related to tribal rituals. With Dehries are related the icons and religious diets. The most controversial motif found in innumerable places is the icon of serpent, named as Naga. Nags play important role in the rituals, whenever the people need rain, and farmers wanted water urgently they would gather around the deities sermonising for several days together beating drums until the sky started pouring water drops.^{xiv} Next symbol of mythical importance rather than social one is the Swastika. Swastika by its nature depicts motion-clockwise motion towards progress. It symbolises Ganesha-a mythological god. The third most important symbol used in folk-art in this belt is burning sun. Folk paintings also depict the sun, the moon and other natural objects.^{xv} Most of the Rajput clans migrated from other parts of the country so as to preserve their existence, claims their origin from Suryavansha of Rama. Generally the sun is taken

as a symbol of 'Shourya'.^{xvi} Another important symbol used by the Duggar folk is 'Elephant'. The significance of elephant is that it can be taken as the symbol of strength and force. The chiselled figures also show the moving elephants. Most of the folk paintings in the ceremonies like Hoyee and paintings on the outer walls of the mud houses show the figures of elephants. Jammu school of Pahari-paintings also show some elephant riders in magnificent shining colours.^{xvii} The popularity of an animal which does not exist in the locality is something conspicuous. One can easily conclude that the common folk might have known the animal from the scriptures but then the image of the elephant ought to have been sacred to the Dogras, but, contrary to it, the icons of elephant so far found only convey its beauty as a carrier for the aristocrats and warriors.^{xviii} Thus we can say that these folk paintings and symbols were the result of various cultural contacts which took place in the past and they also show some kind of continuity in the form of performing these symbolic rituals or traditions and also by simply perceiving them. These paintings also reveal that the Dogras were very much fond of terracotta, pottery designing, wood carving, wall painting, paper work etc.^{xix}

The Basholi artist were inspired by Vaishnav ideas. The devotional poetry of Bhakti saints and mystics were given lively and visual expression by Basholi painters like other rajput paintings. The Dogra wall paintings reflect this continuity of traditions. The Dogra wall painters were skilled at depicting the inner feeling of their human characters; expressions of anguish, pain, anger, terror look out at us from these walls. The most important characteristic of Dogra wall painting is that it is primarily religious. The thematic content is predominantly sacred. A study of the iconography of these paintings is therefore important to determine its value as a vehicle for religious propagation.^{xx} The portraits of hill Rajas were also a favourite theme of the Basholi artists. The Pahari warrior chiefs were particularly suited to the fierce and bold treatment characteristics of the Basholi school of Dogra painting. The Rajas and their courtiers, consorts, and concubines and servants, scholars, soldiers and saints and village folk were depicted with equal zeal and skill. In fact, the folk and courtly styles are so intermingled that it would be difficult to separate the elements of both.^{xxi} Folk art is non-elitist, rural, traditional and to certain extent the art of peasants, herdsmen, artisans and small tradesmen living, as a rule away from urban centres. With the exception of Jammu, there were hardly any other conurbations in this area. The artists themselves were mostly artisans from rural backgrounds. The courts were not as formal as the Muslims courts; hence the basic folk and traditional forms were bound to find a place even in sophisticated paintings done on palace walls. Various elements of folk-art present in these paintings, starting from their thematic content. In folk art everywhere, there is a celebration of what is recurrent in the community's life. The daily routine of life, more specially the basics of existence, like the changing seasons, the cycle of birth, marriage and death, the celebration of fairs and festivals, and, what is most important, the daily ritual of listening to mythological tales. Among fairs and festivals, the most popular appears to be the festival of colour celebrated in spring, namely Holi. Despite these folk elements, Dogra wall painting remains a sophisticated art. The constant interchange between the Jammu court and the later courts of the hills states of Himachal Pradesh which were patrons of a very polished style of wall painting, added a sophisticated touch to Dogra art, both in miniature and wall painting.^{xxii} One of the important purposes of the wall paintings here was a decorative one. It is clear that the comparative lack of furniture and sculpture in hill buildings left only a single avenue for decoration, and that was through the creation of attractive and colourful walls. These paintings, in spite of the fact that they are essentially ritualistic and have a preponderance of religious themes, are not totally conventional and hieratic.^{xxiii} There is a degree of freshness, vigour and a certain buoyancy of expression that born out of the Pahadi ethos. Dogra wall paintings are influenced by folk and sophisticated forms, and the iconography is innovative. In the brief span of about eighty years, the art did not become stagnant but remained colourful throughout. It is unique, being essentially the product of artists who were inspired by acutely felt aesthetic ideals nurtured in magnificent surroundings. They have left us a legacy of hauntingly beautiful images.^{xxiv}

Conclusion

It is truism that all art forms are the end product of both old and contemporary influences, and the Dogra wall paintings are no exception to this. The Dogra wall painters were however brilliant enough to absorb and digest all

the influences that came to their inheritance and they created a highly individual style, characterized by a relaxed informality where man and nature seem completely in harmony. The folk element combined with a subtle sophistication makes the style one that is unique to Indian art. The high degree of technical skill shown by the artists in drawing, the subtle colour schemes devised by them, their ability to create tightly-knit composition within a confined and limited area, and to create the effect of space, of light, perspective and movement, shows their superb mastery over their medium. As we have already discussed that the boundaries and political alignments of the region were constantly in flux, the political atmosphere in the neighbouring states was unfavourable for artists and literary men, and at the same time close contacts with other hill states. Thus the nature of change was that the Dogras were not losing their identity and traditional cultural heritage due to various cultural influences in the past. But the fact is that there were changes in traditional practices and adoption of new beliefs and values in the form of art, no doubt these folk-paintings are of their own origin, but it is also true that the Dogras exposure to various forces such as social, political, cultural as well as economic benefitted them in many ways.

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