



CHAMBA RUMAL: EMBROIDERIES OF THE HIMALAYAN REGION

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ABSTRACT: India has a great tradition of embroidery and different regions have distinctive styles of fine embroidery on cotton, silk and wool fabric. From coverlets to garments, these embroideries have lots of charm and attraction. Of all the regions of the country, the most artistic and picturesque embroidery comes from the Chamba state. It is known as Chamba *rumal* (coverlet) and is done on white muslin or cotton fabric with colourful silk threads and silver metal thread. Although it is commonly known as Chamba *rumal*, it is not only *rumal* or coverlets that are made using this style. The important ones are wall hangings, variety of costumes, fans, covers etc., with beautiful religious, secular, geometric and floral patterned themes. The Chamba *rumals* show an interesting aspect of embroidery tradition, which reflects the social and cultural life of the people of this region.

After careful selection of some of the *rumals* from the collection of the National Museum, New Delhi, an attempt has been made to show its variety in the types of embroidery and themes that appear on these *rumals*.

KEY WORDS: India – Himachal Pradesh – Chamba state – embroidery – *rumal* – coverlet – *mal-mal* – cotton cloth – geometric pattern – floral pattern – figural pattern – ritual art – secular art

Small, quiet and picturesquely beautiful, the Chamba state¹ has a special place among the hill states of the Western Himalayan region. Located on the bank of the river Ravi,

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¹ The earliest reference to Chamba comes from Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, which mentions the name of *Raja Meruvarman*, who ruled here in 7th century. The important geographical situation of this region inspired the then ruler, *Raja Sahila Varman*, to shift the capital from *Brahmapura* to Chamba in the first half of the 10th century. It is said that *Sahila Varman's* daughter liked the plateau of Chamba very much and asked her father to build a town and make it the capital. So he did and named it Chamba after his beloved daughter. It is also believed that the *chompaka* trees in the township may have given it its name. *Khandalawala, K.*, In: *Ohri, V.C. and Khanna, A.N. (eds) (1989), 2–3.*

Chamba is a part of Northern India (at present in Himachal Pradesh) and has a unique geographical position. This region is surrounded by Jammu and Kashmir to the north-west and west, Ladakh and Bara Bangahal to the north-east and the district of Kangra and Gurdaspur to the south-east and south. Situated on the trade route from Delhi to Kashmir, it provides an opportunity for local people to interact with diverse people, from travellers, traders, spiritual leaders to neighbors. This can be seen throughout its long history, which has a rich cultural background. From 8th century onwards the continuous flow of art from this region has provided many great works. The important ones are wooden temples,² brass and bronze images of Hindu Gods and Goddesses,³ palaces decorated with wall paintings decorated palaces,⁴ a huge collection of *Pahari* miniature paintings⁵ and embroidered *rumals*. Since the focus of this paper is the embroidery of the Chamba region, therefore the embroidery tradition that existed here, its style, production techniques and the vast range of subjects that appeared on *rumals* will be discussed in detail here.

Technical Knowhow of the Chamba *Rumal*

The term "Chamba *rumal*" is generally used for a square *mal-mal* (muslin) or cotton cloth coverlet embroidered with colourful silken threads. Here the term *rumal* should not be looked at in the context of handkerchiefs, as these *rumals* were used as coverlets for platters on religious and ceremonial occasions. There are a few *Pahari* miniature paintings in which embroidered *rumals* have been depicted as coverlets.⁶ These coverlets were used especially at the time of offering gifts to God and at weddings, when the exchange of gifts between the bride and bridegroom's side would take place. Apart from *rumals*, sometimes large hangings were also made to offer to a guest in a house or village or state. One such rectangular hanging was given by Raja Gopal Singh (1870–1873) to a British dignitary who visited Chamba state.⁷ Apart from hangings and coverlets, this style of embroidery work was also carried out on religious textiles, costumes and miscellaneous things. The most common objects in the religious group are the *gomukhi* ('L' shaped prayer bag) and throne cover. The headdress, *patka* (sash), *choli* (woman's bodice worn with a long skirt or *saree*) and handkerchief are a few of the costumes which were decorated with this type of embroidery work. There are also few other assorted things such as fans, *chaupar* (a

² The earliest wooden temples are dated to 10th–12th century. Ibid, 9.

³ The magnificent brass Ganesha and bronze bull images at Brahmapura and brass Sakti Devi images at Chhatrarhi are dated to the first half of 8th century. They give the name of the sculptor, Gugga.

⁴ According to an inscription preserved in the temple of Devi Koti, the murals on the walls of the palace were painted in 1754. From time to time changes occurred. Rang Mahal was beautifully painted with several paintings and it is believed that some rooms of Rang Mahal were painted by the painters Durga and Mahgru. Some of the wall paintings were moved to the National Museum, New Delhi in 1962–64. Other painted palaces were the Arkhand Chandi palace painted by Main Tara Singh and Obi Dharmasala. Mittal, J. (1952–1953), 11–18.

⁵ Umed Singh and his son gave patronage to Mughal court artists around the 18th century. Ranjha Ram Lal Ram Sahari was a court painter who worked at Raja Singh's court. Ohri, V. C. (2001).

⁶ The State Museum, Lucknow has a Bhagavata Purana painting depicting young wives of Brahmins of Mathura who are shown holding plates covered with *rumal*. The wedding of Rama and his brothers depicts a lady with a *rumal* covering that was published in painted version by Goswamy, B.N. (1999), 250–251.

⁷ This hanging is preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Sharma, K.P. (2009), 143.

board game) spreads, pillow covers, basket covers etc., which featured a similar style of embroidery to that practiced on coverlets.⁸

Since the best embroidered *rumals* known so far come from the Chamba region, they gained the generic name "Chamba *rumal*". However, the tradition of embroidery was practiced in other centers of the Himalayan region, where art and culture flourished. The other important centers were Nurpur, Kangra, Mandi, Kehlur (Bilaspur), Basholi, Jammu and the adjacent area of Punjab.⁹

These coverlets were generally square in shape; however, examples of rectangular and circular shaped coverlets are also found in many collections. These *rumals* were usually embroidered on white fine *mal-mal* or other cotton cloth, but sometimes red coloured *rumal* was also found.¹⁰ Untwisted silk threads (*pattu*) were also used for embroidery in some of the early pieces, and the use of metal thread (silver *zari* thread) and mirror work was also evident. The silk threads were available from the market of Sialkot (now in Pakistan), Amritsar and Ludhiana (in Punjab), but early examples show the use of Chinese silk threads,¹¹ which were available from the market of the Ladakh region.

The 'double satin stitch' or Kashmir's *do-rukha* (double sided) technique was the most favored method for coverlets. However, the single satin stitch, darn stitch, cross stitch, buttonhole stitch and chain stitch were also used for embroidering these coverlets. Generally the line work on these coverlets was drawn in black or maroon colour; which can be seen from those examples where only the outlines are left and the embroidery threads have gone. It is a known fact that skilled women of the region, in their leisure time, used to produce this reversible embroidery. Quite often it became hard to identify the right side of the coverlet; the fine work of embroidery gives the impression of a raised painting done on cloth.

History of the Embroidery Tradition

There is no clear date for the beginning of embroidery tradition in the Chamba region. However, the earliest surviving coverlet produced in Chamba *rumal* style is believed to have been made by Nanki, sister of Guru Nanak Devji, and is preserved in a Sikh shrine in the Gurudaspur district of Punjab.¹² The embroidery is in narrative style, and a lot of village activities can be seen. It is believed that like any other state of India, the Chamba region witnessed the tradition of embroidery from early times. Buddhist literature makes reference to the existence of an early embroidery tradition in that region. Probably this tradition started with basic line work, simple human figures and limited subjects. Later on, the nice composition, soothing colours, fine stitch work and in time the addition of varied subjects made it so popular that by the mid 18th century the art of embroidery was patronized by the rulers of the Himalayan region. In fact, the period of Umed Singh of Chamba (r.1748–64) is very important in the field of art and culture. This dynamic leader patronized the Mughal artists, who started coming from Delhi court after the

⁸ Goswamy, B.N. (1999), 10–12; Bhattacharya, A.K. (1975), 77.

⁹ Aryan, S. (1976), 13; Aryan, S. (2005), 181.

¹⁰ Pathak, A. (2009), 137, pl. 19.3.

¹¹ Pathak, A. (2002), 1–29.

¹² Khurshid, Z. (1988), 3.

decline of the strong Mughal rulers. Like his father, his son Raja Raj Singh (r.1764–94) also patronized the Mughal court artists and there were a number of artists who worked with the Chamba rulers.¹³ Raj Singh's son Raja Jit Singh and his successors, Raja Charat Singh (r.1808–1844) and Raja Sri Singh (r.1844–1870) also took lots of interest and it is believed that the best *rumals* were created during this phase. Once royalty started taking an interest in Chamba *rumal*, the difference in selection of subjects, classical style line drawing and use of soft colours with good composition and a variety of themes was clearly evident in these coverlets. In fact such coverlets are often reminiscent of the *Pahari* style of miniature painting, which also had royal patronage. Raja Jit Singh was married to Sharada Devi, the princess of Jammu, and it is believed that she was skilled in embroidery work. The next important ruler, Gopal Singh, contributed a lot to the development of the region. An important reference point of Chamba embroidery comes from this phase, when he gave a huge hanging to Lord Mayo, the fourth Viceroy of India, during his state visit on 13 November 1871.¹⁴ The name of Raja Sham Singh, son of Gopal Singh, is also very significant with regard to the popularisation of the embroidery tradition, as he introduced the craft of embroidery as a subject in the state girl's school in 1904. His son, Raja Bhuri Singh,¹⁵ also played an important role in making these coverlets popular in abroad. Under his supervision some coverlets were specially embroidered, and he took them to Delhi on the occasion of Imperial *Durbars* held in the years 1903, 1907 and 1911.¹⁶ Some of the pieces are housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.¹⁷ At present a non-government organization named the Delhi Craft Council, with the help of the Government of India, is working to propagate the Chamba *rumal*. It has now become popular and a large number of women in the region are busy in making good work of Chamba *rumal* for the domestic and export market.

Embroidery Style

When these coverlets are examined on the basis of the line drawing, embroidery stitches and subjects that appear on them, often two distinct styles are evident: 'folk' and 'classical'. The appearance of folk elements on coverlets gave them the name of 'folk *rumals*'. The limited subject matter, unbalanced composition, not very good line drawing, use of bright colours for embroidery and uneven long stitches are characteristic of these folk coverlets. Although most museums have a large number of folk style coverlets in their collections, the quality found in the classical ones is far superior. The rich subject matter and intricate embroidery puts them in the category of classical style coverlets. Most scholars are of the opinion that the rich tradition of painting on paper, cloth and walls of this region might have inspired women to embroider the same subjects on coverlets. The strong line work and use of soft soothing colours are the main focal point of these coverlets. And when similar subjects, sometimes composition, of coverlets is found in miniature paintings or

¹³ Ohri, V.C. and Khanna, A.N. (eds) (1989), 13.

¹⁴ (1904), Chamba State Gazetteer, Punjab (Pakistan), 114.

¹⁵ Raja Bhuri Singh and J. P. Vogel, British officials, were the main instrument for establishing the museum in Chamba in 1904, which was named after Raja.

¹⁶ Watts, Sir, G. (1903), 379.

¹⁷ Hall, M. (1999), 83–97.

wall paintings, it gives the impression that court artists of *Pahari* schools might have done the drawing on these coverlets and even provided the supervision for colour schemes. One thing is very clear – these coverlets were made with great passion, whether in folk or classical style.

Subject of Embroideries

The embroidered coverlet shows a vast range of subject matter from religious to secular and from geometric to floral patterns. In the religious group the most popular themes that appeared on these coverlets are: *Rasamandala* of Krishna and *gopis*, Krishna with flute, Krishna-Balarama-Subhadra,¹⁸ *Rukmani harana*,¹⁹ Krishna, Holy Family of Shiva,²⁰ Gajantaka Siva,²¹ Hanuman, Ganesha, Shakti etc. In the secular category an important theme that often appeared on embroidered coverlets were wedding scenes. Some of the famous weddings depicted on coverlets are: the Krishna and Rukmani, Shiva and Parvati, Rama and Sita²² and Raja Jit Singh's wedding with Rani Sharada Devi (of Jammu).²³ Apart from religious and wedding themes, there are coverlets which illustrate hunting scenes, floral and geometric patterns etc. Some of the *rumals* in the collection of the National Museum, New Delhi have been discussed in detail.

A. Religious Subjects

A. 1

Rasamandala

Chamba, Himachal Pradesh

Early 20th century

White cotton base; silk thread in blue, orange, green, grey, white, yellow, pink and black.

Embroidered with double satin, cross and buttonhole stitch.

Size: L: 66 cm; W: 64 cm

Acc. no.: 62.2308

The most popular theme that appeared on coverlets is the *rasamandala* dance of Krishna, where he dances with *gopis* in circle. The essence of this concept is that God is everywhere and will remain with everybody. On this coverlet the two-armed Lord Vishnu is standing inside a circle and four pair of Krishna and *gopis* are dancing around him. All the dancers while dancing are holding flowers and each other's hands. There is a pair of peacocks on four sides and the corner has flower *butas* (flower motif). This dance composition is surrounded by cross borders, which show the usual floral creeper motif. The remaining portion of the *rumal* is embroidered with a stylized flower pattern, birds, plants etc. in a colourful manner. The edges have been done in buttonhole stitching technique. The simple line work and use of bright colours indicate its folk style, as none of them are facing each other, which can be seen in the classical style of *rasamandala rumals*.

¹⁸ Bhattacharya, A.K. (1968), 34.

¹⁹ Jain, J. and Aggrawal, A. (1989), 152.

²⁰ Pathak, A. (1989), 136–138.

²¹ Pathak, A. (2004), 52–56.

²² Pathak, A. (2009), 138.

²³ (1945–1946), *An early Basholi Chamba rumal*, 35–42.

A. 2 a

Lakshmi-Narayana

Chamba, Himachal Pradesh

Mid 19th century

White muslin base, silk thread in yellow, blue, orange, green, pink and white.

Embroidered with single satin stitch.

Size: L: 89 cm; W: 89 cm

Acc. no.: 61.1011

This large square coverlet has an impressive image of Lakshmi-Narayana in the center, accompanied by two attendants. The central theme of the coverlet is surrounded by a circular border in place of the usual cross border, illustrating the foliage pattern in a colourful manner. All the corners depict small flower *butas* with leaves and buds.

Sitting on a lotus pedestal, the two armed Lakshmi-Narayana couple is dressed in their usual attire and ornaments. Narayana (Vishnu) wears a yellow *dhoti* (lower garment), orange *patka* and flowered crown, while Lakshmi, who is sitting on his lap, wears a *lahanga* (long skirt), *choli* (bodice) and *odhani* (head covering). Their lotus pedestal seat is coming out from a pond, which also has lotus leaves and buds around it. Hanuman, who stands in front of the Lord, holds his weapon, a *gada* (mace, which is only reflected in line drawing) and is offering a fruit bowl to the Lord. The crowned Hanuman wears a striped lower garment and contrast colour *patka*. An attendant holding a *chauri* (fly whisk) is standing at the back of the Lord. He is also crowned, wears *dhoti* and *patka* and holds *chauri* (only the line drawing is visible). The remaining portion of the coverlet is also embroidered with flowers, leaves and buds in a colourful manner. The most interesting aspect of this coverlet is the depiction of larger images than the usual small images that appear on most of the coverlets.

Interestingly there is a coverlet in the collection of the National Museum, Prague with an almost similar type of composition (**Fig. A. 2b**). Here the two-armed Lakshmi-Narayana is in standing posture (in place of the Delhi National Museum's sitting posture) on a lotus pedestal, which is coming out from a pond. They are flanked by four persons, two male and two female. In place of the Delhi National Museum's Hanuman, here Narada is standing in front of Lakshmi-Narayana. Narada is the foster son of Lord Brahma, who is one of the trinity of the Hindu pantheon. The rest of the attendants hold *chauri*, utensils and other things. In place of the Delhi National Museum's circular border around the main theme, here a square frame is used as a border. Although the subject and composition of both coverlets are quite similar, on the basis of line drawing and use of colours the Prague National Museum's coverlet appears to be late 19th century workmanship done by Chamba artists.

A. 3

Krishna-Radha

Guler/Chamba, Himachal Pradesh

Mid 19th century

White fine cotton base, silk thread in yellow, blue, green, pink, greenish blue, black and white; silver *zari* thread.

Embroidered with double satin and darn stitch.

Size: L: 66 cm; W: 64 cm

Acc. no.: 49.19/332

This coverlet is beautifully embroidered with the playful activities of Krishna-Radha within a cross border. Here the artist has very skilfully illustrated four different moods of Krishna and Radha arranged in the four corners of the coverlet, which has been artistically divided by a row of trees. In all scenes two female attendants are shown accompanying them. The narration starts from the lower left scene and moves clockwise. In the first scene Krishna is sitting on the floor, and it appears that he is inquiring about Radha from her friend. On the upper left in the second scene, Radha is sitting on a throne and Krishna on the floor. Here Krishna is trying to explain the reason for his late coming to Radha, who has covered herself with a veil and is not talking to him. (This aspect is often discussed in *Nayika-bheda* of the famous Rasamanjari text of medieval period.) In the third scene, Krishna is sitting in front of Radha with folded hands and bowed head. Here Krishna is trying to pursue her, while Radha has not only covered her face, but turned her face in the opposite direction. As mentioned in the texts, after long persuasion Radha became happy and forgave Krishna, which has been depicted in the last scene. It depicts Krishna-Radha sitting on a throne and looking at each other with love and affection. Use of *zari* thread is also evident in places, especially on the costumes of Krishna-Radha, the throne legs and the utensils which the attendants are carrying. This coverlet is reminiscent of the *Pahari* miniature painting, which also depicts the same theme.

A. 4

Mahabharata and Kiratarjuni

Guler/Kangra, Himachal Pradesh

Last quarter of 19th century

White cotton base; silk thread in pink, blue, yellow and white.

Embroidered with double satin stitch.

Size: L: 227 cm; W: 174 cm

Acc. no.: 64.160

The great epic of India narrates many stories and quite often inspires the artists to create art works based on them. The National Museum has a big hanging which has been beautifully embroidered with a Mahabharata war scene and the story of Kiratarjuni in typical floral creeper borders. The center scene of the hanging depicts the big fight between warriors of Pandava and Kaurava. On the right side Arjuna's chariot is depicted, with Krishna dressed as warrior shown as a *sarathi* (charioteer). Krishna's *mayur mukut* (peacock feather crown) and his blowing conch action suggests that this scene may indicate either the beginning or end of the war. Arjuna is dressed in body armor, helmet and *patka* and holds a bow and arrow. He stands in front of a royal warrior from Kaurava's side, who is riding on an elephant. The lowest part of the hanging depicts the man to

man fight, with warriors are dressed in body armor and hold swords, shields, bows and arrows.

The next important scene of the hanging is the story of Kiratarjuni, which has been embroidered in the upper right-hand corner of the hanging. Kiratarjuni's story first appeared in Mahabharata and then in other texts.²⁴ The first scene depicts the fight between *kirata* and Arjuna for a wild boar which is in the center. The boar is being shot with arrows from both sides. To create the impression of Indrakila mountain, the artist depicted a tree, bushes and animals around the main images. Just behind this scene Arjuna is seated in the ascetic form, worshipping and offering flowers to *shivalinga*. Interestingly, a group of weapons are lying in front of him, which indicates that the artist wants to highlight the reason for Arjuna's worship. In the third and final scene Arjuna falls at the feet of *Kirata*, and this entire episode is witnessed by *Kirati* (Parvati), as mentioned in later texts. With the help of just three scenes, the artist of this hanging successfully portrayed the story of famous Kiratarjuni, which was more popular in the south than the north. Just one set of *Pahari* miniature paintings of 19th century is known so far.²⁵ So far two long hangings with a common subject embroidered in Chamba *rumal* style are known; in the Victoria and Albert Museum (further referred to as the VA), London and the National Museum (further referred as NM), New Delhi. The line work, treatment of figures, their attire, crown, arms, armor, helmet and embroidery style is similar in both the hangings. The VA Museum hanging is bigger than the NM's, but the VA's hanging depicts only the Mahabharata war scene, whereas the National Museum's hanging illustrates the Mahabharata war scene and Kiratarjuni story. Both hangings have many similarities and the VA's hanging was donated during Raja Gopal Singh's period in 1871. It is therefore possible that the National Museum's hanging is also embroidered by women of Chamba in around the 1870s probably during the Raja Sri Singh or Raja Gopal Singh's period under royal supervision.

²⁴ The Vana Parva of Mahabharata refers to the story of Kiratarjuni that one day Maharishi Vyas visited the Pandavas during their exile period. Maharishi advised them that Arjuna should go to Indra and do *tapas* (penance) for the powerful *ayudh* (weapons). So Arjuna went to Indrakila hill, which is in the north of the Himalayan region and did *tapa* (meditation). After some time the God Indra came to Arjuna in the ascetic form and asked him why he was doing *tapas*. "Are you doing it for *moksha*?" Arjuna replied that he was not doing it for *moksha*, but that such deep meditation was to get the special weapons, so that he could take revenge on Kauravas. Then Indra revealed his original form and advised him to do penance for Lord Siva to get the grace of the Lord. Then Arjuna started doing very rigorous *tapas*, he stopped taking meals and water and stood on one foot for months together. All the sages who were meditating in the forest were perturbed by Arjuna's *tapas* and went to Lord Shiva for help. Shiva assured them that soon he would find a way to help them. Thereupon Shiva and Parvati, dressed in *kirata* (hunter) and *kirati* (huntress) form, went to the place where Arjuna was doing *tapas*. As they were approaching Arjuna they saw that the demon *mukadanava*, in the form of a wild boar, was rushing towards Arjuna, who became disturbed and took his bow and arrow to shoot the animal. Just then the *kirata* arrived on the scene and contested Arjuna's right to shoot the arrow, as the animal was his lawful prey. Both shot an arrow and the wild boar fell down dead. A battle of words and a physical duel then started between the *kirata* and Arjuna. First they fought with arrows, then bows, later with swords, stones, trees and other things. However, to Arjuna's surprise everything was in vain. When finally they started to wrestle, Arjuna was defeated and became unconscious. When Arjuna recovered and realized that his opponent was more than a mortal, he immediately made a clay *shivalinga* and started worshipping. When Arjuna offered flowers and garland to the *shivalinga*, which at once went to *kirata*, then Arjuna understood that the *kirata* is not mortal but divine, and none other than the Lord himself, whom he was worshipping. Immediately he fell at his feet, begged his forgiveness and apologized for his daring deed. Shiva said he was testing him, and then all the gods came and gave the magical (powerful) weapons to Arjuna.

²⁵ Nagaraja Rao, M.S. (1979), 81.

A. 5

Gomukhi

Chamba, Himachal Pradesh

Early 20th century

Brown coarse cotton base, silk thread in white, blue, pink and yellow; mirror.

Embroidered with single satin, chain, buttonhole and cross stitch.

Size: L: 33 cm; W: 26 cm

Acc. no.: 62.1945

The 'L' shaped *gomukhi* is a prayer bag for keeping the string of prayer beads used by the devotees during the chanting of *mantras*. Three large full blown flower motifs in three different colour petals are embroidered on the front of the *gomukhi* while the other side is plain. A small circular mirror in the center of each flower has been very neatly fixed by buttonhole stitch. Each petal of the flowers has distinctive contrast colour embroidery in chain stitch which makes the motifs more colourful. Buds and leaves are embroidered around the flower motifs and all these motifs are beautifully surrounded by a narrow border.

B. Secular Subjects

B. 6

Wedding scenes

Kangra/Chamba, Himachal Pradesh

Mid 18th century

White muslin base; silk thread in white, pink, yellow, light blue, dark blue, green, white and maroon; silver *zari* thread.

Embroidered with double satin and darn stitch.

Size: L: 77 cm; W: 75 cm

Acc. no.: 60.891

In the secular group, the most popular subject to appear on coverlets are wedding scenes. This coverlet also depicts part of a wedding function in narrative manner within the usual floral border. It portrays the return of a *barat* (bridegroom's guests) from the bride's house after the wedding. The well-dressed bridegroom is on horseback, while other people are on elephants, camel and horseback, with lots of treasure on the animals' backs. Musicians, standard- and fan bearers are part of the procession, which is being witnessed by people who are peeping from windows. In the central scene the bridegroom is shown walking, while the bride is coming out from a palanquin and in the next segment the newly wedded couple is walking together towards the entrance of the house, where the groom's mother is standing with an *arti* (lamp) to welcome them.

This coverlet beautifully illustrates the whole atmosphere of welcoming the newly wedded couple in the bridegroom's house, where many activities are going on; ladies are singing, ladies are holding lamps or vanity boxes etc. All these activities are taking place inside the *aagan* (central courtyard of the house) as an architectural wall with a window and door; trees can also be seen. The ends of the bride and bridegroom's costumes end portion have been decorated with *zari* threads. This coverlet is a very important piece of the collection, as the name of the embroiderer, Govindadasi, is embroidered on the left side corner of coverlet.

B. 7

Rumal with geometric pattern

Chamba, Himachal Pradesh

Late 19th century

White fine cotton base; silk thread in maroon, blue, yellow, green, brown, and white.

Embroidered with double satin stitch.

Size: L: 61 cm; W: 59.5 cm

Acc. no.: 62.2753

This coverlet is different from the usual set patterns of Chamba *rumal*, since here the floral pattern is embroidered in geometric style within a square broad border around the central motif. The central pattern is dominated by the bunch of eight flowers and creeper motifs, while all the corners have a three-flower *buta* pattern facing towards the central *buta*. The beautiful broad border has a similar style of flower and creeper motif as the center, while there is a fine triangular style of small *buties* with cross pattern on both sides of the borders. This style of embroidery is reminiscent of the *phulkari* of the Punjab region.

B. 8

Couple in pavilion

Chamba, Himachal Pradesh

Last quarter of 19th century

White cotton base; silk thread in pink, blue, yellow, green, black, brown and white; silver *zari* thread.

Embroidered with double satin stitch.

Size: L: 66 cm; W: 64 cm

Acc. no.: 62.703

This coverlet shows the beautiful palace architecture where a couple is enjoying music. The palace architecture has been executed in two tiers; the area where couple is sitting on a striped *dari* (rug) under a canopy appears to be a terrace and the area where attendants are gives the impression of the lower portion of palace. Sitting against a bolster, the male is dressed in *choga*, *patka* and turban, while the female wears a *lahanga*, *choli* and *odhani* showing membership of the social elite. The fact that the couple is flanked by a *chauri* (fly whisk) bearer at the back and other female attendants holding big plates covered with coverlets indicates that they are having a feast. A betel box is also placed nearby and indicates the custom of having betel after a meal. In the lower segment of the palace, female attendants are playing musical instruments such as the *dolaka* (drum) and *veena*, while other attendants are holding utensils, flowers and other things. There are pairs of peahens and ducks around a *tulsi* (considered the most auspicious plant with medicinal properties; every Hindu always has it at home). Two trees in full bloom are in the background and reflect the good mood and atmosphere of the scene. To find architecture on coverlets is rare, so this object is important for its depiction of architecture and perspective.

B. 9

Circular chhabu

Chamba, Himachal Pradesh

Early 20th century

White fine cotton base; silk thread in pink, green, brown, orange, black and white.

Embroidered with single satin stitch.

Size: Diam.: 76.5 cm

Acc. no.: 62.1198

This circular coverlet although less in number, but carries the essence of the Chamba *rumal* tradition. Such circular coverlets, which are popularly known as 'chhabu', were generally used for covering bamboo baskets (known as *chhabri*).²⁶ The center of this coverlet has a six-petal pink flower, which is surrounded by small flowers and foliage pattern all over. The entire field of the coverlet has a stylized floral creeper and it also has a broad border all around. These borders are also decorated with the foliage pattern in a very artistic way. The whole composition of the coverlet features fine line drawing and a soft soothing colour scheme.

B. 10

Hunting scene

Chamba, Himachal Pradesh

Late 19th century

White *mal-mal* (fine muslin) base; silk thread in green, yellow, blue, pink, white, grey and black, silver *zari* thread.

Embroidered with double satin and cross stitch.

Size: L: 68 cm; W: 64 cm

Acc. no.: 61.1010

Here the coverlet illustrates a hunting scene surrounded by asquare border frame. The border has been executed in the usual simple foliage pattern, while there is a narrow additional border on the edges of both borders, embroidered with cross stitch. The entire field of the coverlet beautifully illustrates the hunting scene, which shows the movement of hunters and animals. Hunters on horseback and elephants are busy hunting lion, deer or boar. The most fascinating aspect of this coverlet is that it gives the feel of force whether of the hunters, who are hunting with swords, or the animals running here and there.

²⁶ Singh, M.G. (1983), 113.

C. Costume

C. 11

Choli

Chamba, Himachal Pradesh

Early 20th century

Brown coarse cotton base; silk thread in white, blue, yellow, pink, green, grey and orange; green striped piping.

Embroidered with single satin, chain, cross and buttonhole stitch.

Size: L: 46 cm; Sleeve 26 cm.

Acc. no.: 60.841/1

This half sleeve backless *choli* has a 'V' shaped neck and a small rectangular apron which adds to the grace of this women's upper garment. A pair of folk style peacocks has been embroidered on the front side of the *choli* and one pair is on upper part of each sleeve. The peacock has an elongated neck; his colourful feathers have been arranged as if he is in a dancing pose. There is green coloured striped piping cloth around the apron and neck. Long blue coloured cotton thread has been stitched on the front side of the *choli* in between the cup part and the apron of the *choli*, which functions as a tied. There is also a small brown cloth thread around the neck for tying.

D. Games

D. 12

Chaupar spread

Chamba, Himachal Pradesh

Early 20th century

Brown coarse cotton base; pink cotton lining; silk thread in white, yellow, blue, pink and green ; mirrors; triangular white cloth as fringes is attached.

Embroidered with single satin, chain and buttonhole stitch.

Size: 41 x 41 cm

Acc. no.: 60.843

Two broad strips of cloth have been stitched together in a cross shape to make a board for the game of *chaupar*. The game is one of the earliest board games of India, played with sixteen pieces and three dice. This game is mentioned in the epic Mahabharata and other texts also. The center of the spread depicts a flower motif in colourful style, while the remaining portion of the *chaupar* spread has been worked with small squares arranged in three rows. These squares are either filled with colourful threads or left plain with just mirror decoration. The balance of colour is good and it makes the *chaupar* spread very attractive.

These colourful embroidered coverlets from the Himachal region illustrate the very rich variety of objects, from chaupar spread and choli to coverlet, on which both religious and secular subjects appeared.²⁷ As people of this region are very religious-minded,

²⁷ For all pictures the author is grateful to photographers Shri Suresh Mehto and Shri Sunil Jain.

which is reflected in their art work, many coverlets depict Lord Krishna, Rama, Shiva, Hanuman and Lakshmi-Narayana. Besides their Lord, people also depicted flora and fauna, architecture and geometric patterns in an effective manner. All such coverlets have great charm, attraction and aesthetic appeal, which have kept this art alive for centuries and ensure that it will continue.

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Photographs by Shri Suresh Mehto, Shri Sunil Jain and Jirí Vaněk

All photographs (except A. 2 b) courtesy National Museum, New Delhi



Fig. A.1 Rasamandala



Fig. A. 2a Lakshmi-Narayana



Fig. A. 2b Lakshmi-Narayana



Fig. A. 3 Krishna-Radha



Fig. A. 4 Mahabharata and Kiratarjuni



Fig. A. 5 Gomukhi



Fig. B. 6 Wedding scenes



Fig. B. 7 Rumal with geometric pattern



Fig. B. 8 Couple in pavilion



Fig. B. 9 Circular chhabu



Fig. B. 10 Huntig scene



Fig. C. 11 Choli



Fig. D. 12 Chaupar spread