Chapter Seven

CONCLUSIONS AND COMMENTS

Several points emerge from the foregoing description and analysis which may help to deepen our understanding of what was happening in painting and in the Punjab, towards the end of the tradition of painting in these parts.

That there was painting activity addressed cognizance to themes arising from some of the Vaishnava establishments from an early time is clearly established. From the third quarter of the 17th century itself, when most of the early work in the hills was being done at Basohli or Chamba or Mankot or Nurpur, we have miniatures that show a connection with these places. The evidence is not entirely clear as to where most of these miniatures were executed. But from one group of miniatures, those bound in the Bathu Ms., there seems to be little doubt that some activity was generated at one of the establishments like Pindori or Damthal etc. That group of paintings is in a style which, strictly speaking, falls outside the main styles that arose in the centres that were at that time active in the hills in respect of painting. Besides this
naive, perhaps self-taught, work, the paintings of Vaishnava themes in the major and refined styles could have come from any place in the hills: Nurpur, Chamba, Mankot, Bandralta, all centres that have associations with Vaishnavism and that had intense painting activity at this time.

In the period that follows, it appears as if the painting of miniatures at Pindori or any of the other establishments, Shaiva or Shakta, received some kind of a set-back. It is easy to understand this when one takes into account the fact that the major talents had all been drawn to the Pahari states (each of which, practically, had a school of painting of its own. The traffic in respect of miniature painting at this time seems to have been from these states to the monastic establishments; took the form either of painters actually coming to the establishments and producing portraits or other work of which we have no detailed evidence at present, or the presentation of sets of paintings to the mahants as an act of homage by the rulers. The large set of 58 paintings of the Chandi Saptasati bearing the name of Nathu Rajanaka, which was once in the collection of the mahant of Damthal, is fair indication of this. That set was painted apparently in Nurpur but found its way into the collection of the Damthal mahant. Very much in
the same fashion, a number of paintings in the collection of the mahant of Dharamsal were presented by a retired judge of Jammu to the mahant, obviously again as an act of devotion or homage.

Next, the spurt of activity at these establishments that comes to our notice, after the first group of miniatures in the end of the 17th century, is in the form of murals at a large number of establishments, Vaishnava, [Shaiva, Shakta, Udasi. The situation is easy of understanding. This activity starts in the second quarter of the 19th century. At this point of time, we must recall to our minds the fact that the Pahari areas had been overrun by the Sikhs. The old rulers of the hills had little power and perhaps little desire to carry on the normal activities that belonged to them. Then, many of them, at least those in the eastern group, were taken over by the British in A.D.1846, all this, a process which had started in the second decade of the 19th century itself, made an impact. Painters must have started moving out of the hills in search of employment, at least temporarily, some of them landed up in the courts of Lahore, and later of Kapurthala, Nabha, Patiala. But many of them do appear to have come to these establishments. Their having been freed from continued attachment to the Pahari courts proved to be an opportunity for some of these establishments. Not the very best of painters seem to have
come here. But they came in fair numbers. The Lahore darbar, as has been demonstrated in Prof. Goswamy’s study, of Painters at the Sikh Court, attracted a number of painters to whom jagirs etc. were given. But the mahants, in their own turn, also provided patronage of a fair kind at this time. It is not an accident, then, that the activity of painting at these establishments coincides with the decline of the Pahari kingdoms and, also, in part, the decline of the Sikh kingdom of Lahore.

The patronage of art at these places is easy to understand. The mahants had, judging from their interest in the 17th century, and judging from additions to their collections in the 18th, had always had an interest in art. It was probably a part of their total image as not only a spiritual power but, in some measure, a secular power, holding jagirs, managing estates and gathering a darbar of sorts around themselves. The chauri that is waved over the heads of deities and rulers was also waved over the heads of mahants, signifying their exalted status. The mahants then went about, in their little courts, doing the same things that the rulers had done in the hill states. One of the expectations from any ruler was that he would encourage artisans and provide them with employment. The mahants did the same thing here. And they saw in this kind of art an opportunity for making an impact on the large number of
devotees who came to their establishments. That is the reason why the work commissioned by the mahants seems to have taken the form mostly of murals rather than of miniature paintings. The murals were there on the walls for a long time and for every one to see and be impressed by. A devotee could have the sensation of coming to pay his homage to the deity enshrined in a temple, and while walking in the pradakshina path, or while sitting in attendance on the mahant in his gaddighar, look around and see mythological scenes and other things like portraits of the present mahant and the former mahants. A part of the intention in this whole activity seems to have been the embellishment, pure and simple, of the establishments themselves. The total scheme that the mahants seem to have been intent upon, in whatever instructions they gave to the painters, was decorative. As large a number of panels as could fit into this decorative scheme were welcomed. This is the clear impression we get from whatever remains we can now see of murals at these places.

This does not make the mahants out to be particularly discerning patrons. Possibly, an occasional person from these places might have had a genuine feeling for the art and might have discussed with the painters their work, compositions, relevance etc. But, by and large, it appears as if the mahants provided patronage in very general terms.
It is not inconceivable that the orders for providing murals on the walls were even issued by a subordinate, like a wazir or a diwan, at the court of the mahant. But, whatever the circumstance, there is evidence here of at least an interest which is more than what one can see elsewhere in the rest of the Punjab plains at this time. The artists were languishing in the second half of the century except in court like Patiala which had survived great political upheavals and changes.

From the point of view of the artists, we are struck by an interesting fact here. This art is even more anonymous than the art of miniature painting in the Pahari area. As has been pointed out briefly before, with the exception of the faint inscription on a faded panel showing Pandit Suraj Ram Musavvir of Lahore, belonging to the second half of the 19th century, there is not one name that appears on any wall or a painting. If we have some names that can be connected with paintings here, a name like that of Angad of Sirmur or Bishan das of Nurpur, then information we owe to literary evidence rather than to inscriptions on the paintings themselves. The reasons for this might entirely be a combination of several things in the mind of the painter. In a shrine dedicated to god, the painter must have felt perhaps even more reluctant than elsewhere to record his own name as a "creator" of works.
If Angad showed himself as standing with folded hands facing the shrine of the goddess, then he was rendering homage to the goddess, rather than necessarily leaving a record of his own physical features. But it is singular that we have wholly to rely upon vague information, as at Dhyanpur, that some paintings "go back to the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh" or were done by some Kashmiri Brahmins, and so on. In general, nothing at all is available by way of a record of who the painters of these works were. This goes on right into the end of the 19th century, a period from which at least as far as Sikh painting is concerned, we get several names and signed miniatures bearing the names of artists like Kehr Singh, Kapur Singh, Bishan Singh or Bhai Lal Singh, and so on.

In terms of quality, this seems to be the very last flicker of art in these areas. The general quality of work on the walls, as also in the few miniatures which were painted in the 19th century, is by no means high. By close analysis, one can form some kind of admiration for an occasional panel which has evidence of energy or inventiveness on the part of the painter. But the technical skill is fast diminishing and the artist mostly relies upon imitation of models that he had seen for himself in the forms of miniatures earlier. There is a tendency to stay within the strict limits that he had inherited. This is
not difficult to understand, for this also is a part of the tradition. But, at this point, the artist was also receiving several influences that were new to these areas, influences in the form of oil paintings which had not only different techniques but very different kind of compositions. The adjustments made in his own style by the painters of these murals is, however, minimal. He contents himself by attempting to fit whatever he can, in his own inadequate manner, into the compositions and treatment of individual figures he had traditionally learnt to do. The increase in shading and the use of somewhat hard modelling, the interest in the weight and the texture of textiles and garments, the small degree of interest in showing spatial recession etc. is all that we notice. By and large, the artist does not come to terms either with the new scale of painting or with the new values that these paintings held. The responses, therefore, to the changed situation are perhaps inadequate. It is this which characterises the art of the 19th century in the Punjab and it is this which explains to a large extent the final death of this art. Virtually nothing of this survives into the 20th century, even in the inadequate form that we see in the 19th.

In terms of the themes treated of on the walls, points have been made before. The embellishment we spoke of as being the main 'commission' given to the painters, shows
Itself when we notice that the painters did not show any particular sensitivity to the buildings on which they were asked to do their work. "Relevance" is not their concern: they were simply producing on these walls whatever belonged to their general range and repertoire. It is this alone that can explain the total absence of a relevant theme, like that from the Ramayana, on the walls of the Raghunath temple at Pindori. This also explains, on the part of a different artist, the extensive coverage given to the Rama story on the walls of a temple like the Ram Gopal mandir at Damthal which is primarily dedicated to Krishna. This is not to say that Rama themes were taboo in a Krishna temple or Krishna themes could not have been painted on the walls of a Rama temple. Basically, these are Vaishnava themes and a part of the general heritage of painting of the Hindu artists. But, it would not have been inappropriate for the artist to take some cognisance at least of the deity whose glory they were helping to enhance by painting on the walls of the shrine dedicated to him.

It is possible that we might be making too much of the distinction between Rama themes and Krishna themes, or between Vaishnava themes and Shakta or Shaivas themes etc. Such distinctions may not have held valid for the painter. But, the fact that on many of these walls we encounter totally irrelevant subjects, such as the series
of nayaks and nayikas, or ragas and raginis, or even purely genre themes, cannot go without notice. One need not make too much of the occurrence of Sikh themes on the walls of the Hindu establishments, for the sharp distinction we sometimes see in the 20th century between these faiths did not belong in the 19th. In terms of miniature paintings, we know of whole sets of the Janamsakhis or portraits of the ten gurus to have been painted at Hindu courts even in the 18th century when the Sikh presence was by no means considerable. But the occurrence of genre themes such as the armies of the British being inspected, a "Sahib" and "mem" sitting on chairs, a lady holding a parasol, or a group of civil servants examining accounts and hearing tales from a manager, do not obviously belong to a religious establishment if the intention was, through these paintings, to focus further on religion. The occurrence of some Muslim themes on the walls of the Ramtatwali establishment is, from this point of view, even more interesting. We do not know of any other area to which a thing like this can be traced. Quite obviously, the painters went about, almost unsupervised and wholly free, to do their own thing on the spaces which had been provided to them. One could see this, once again, as evidence of lack of discernment on the part of the mahants or the painters, but there is no escaping this situation. This kind of painting was a routine activity to which not too much of attention had been paid.
To derive pleasure and satisfaction from the work at these establishments, specially in the form of murals, then, one has to look around and search hard. It is only then that one might come upon the occasional panel that meant something to the painter and means something to the viewer even now. As for the rest, the interest in the mural activity in these establishments in the 19th century is more historical than aesthetic; for aesthetic pleasure one has to go back by a century or so to the group of distinguished miniatures related to these establishments that we have noticed earlier. These were produced when the art in the hills was at its best and a part of that glory fell to the share of the Hindu establishments which were, we must remember, concentrated in those parts of the plains which were very close to the hills themselves.