Painters at the Sikh Court

Painters at the Sikh Court is the Indian edition of the author's much acclaimed book. Regarded as authority on art, Goswamy had written it 25 years back. South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University had published it then in collaboration with Verlag, perhaps the most reputed publishing firm in Germany. In a way, the present edition is an expanded one. The visual material, now forming a part of the book, was not there earlier. It was also without portraits done by those painters whom documents forming subject matter of the book, deal with. They present them in the process of receiving grants, pleading for their continuance but facing indifference from the functionaries while winning the consideration of the patrons. For all that, this expanded edition also does not deal with Sikh Painting in amplitude. It tackles only a branch of it, significant one of course, which Pahari painters, as they have come to be known since then, nourished and developed prior to but more during the times of Ranjit Singh, the first and perhaps the last independent ruler of the Punjab. The book does not explore the creative principles which went into the making of those compositions, many of them portraits though some are no doubt paintings. No wonder, there is hardly any comment on the interplay of theme and form, structure and texture, line and color and expression and communication. The subject matter of the book comprises the norms defining patronage that, deriving from the Mughal and Rajput conventions, prevailed at that historical juncture. Creative principles, informing those portraits and paintings, are touched upon here and there. This marginal mention is in no way adequate for their grasp. It is the changing dispensation of patronage, its institutional framework, that the book deals with in a rather overwhelming way.

Twenty documents form the material from which the truth content of the book is garnered by Goswamy through his penetrating focus upon terms employed in their texts, the seals affixed at their tops, the honorifics employed for the monarch, his advisors at the court and his subordinates in charge of the hill area to which the family owning the documents belonged. Goswamy's linguistic acumen, particularly of Persian, stands him in good stead for deciphering, decoding and encoding these twenty documents, fifteen of which are in Persian, four in Urdu and one in Hindi. Whereas the first group, comprising three-fourths of the total, relates to the grant of land to a family of Pahari painters, the second one brings out the change that took place in the fortune of the family with the end of Ranjit Singh's kingdom, partly due to internecine warfare among his succes-sors and subsequently with the English take-over of the Punjab. The single document in Hindi is in the form of a petition that the head of the family addressed to the Rani of Chamba in very straitened circumstances.

Running through them all is past significance shedding light upon patronage, partly beneficent and partly egoistic attitude of the patrons, their impulse to patronise the painters in question, at the same time that the local functionaries proved to be indifferent. For showing "how things happened behind the scenes, how painters and patrons came together, what precise relationships were worked out and what the social and economic situation of the artist in India in the past was", these documents have unity of the thematic sort. The fact that they relate to a single, albeit singular family, they form a cogent collection

Painters at the Sikh Court
B.N. Goswamy
Aryan Books International New Delhi
1999 pp. 113+ xx, Rs. 950

facilitating the above-mentioned task. Since their significance goes beyond filiation of the familial context, they constitute an archive rather than a collection.

Goswamy chanced upon these documents in the house of what till today is known as the artist family of Rajol. He found them tucked in a bamboo tube, invariably the way in which "the pandas or priests" preserved their sanads denoting benefits bestowed upon them by their rulers or clients in authority.

The artist family with whom these documents lay couched in obscurity now so marvellously brought to light, traces its genealogy back to Nainsukh whom art critics even of the calibre of the legendary W.G. Archer have found as "one of the most engaging figures in the history of Pahari Painting." One with his predecessors in this regard, Goswamy persisted in unrolling these documents so as to decipher and make sense of the shikasteh, i.e. the freeflowing, unencumbered way of writing in which their scripts were employed. Dispensing with markers meant to facilitate grammatically correct pronunciation and flawless reading of words, phrases and sentences, this way of writing was in vogue with patwaris and munshis, etc. The revenue records, judicial papers and legislative documents were couched invariably in this way of writing.

The book makes it amply clear that Goswamy persisted in deciphering, decoding and encoding these documents. It was a daunting task particularly because, as per his candid confession, "they tended to become more and more unnegotiable as the size of the document became smaller." His masterly analysis of words, terms, codes and conventions, speaks volumes of his diligence and devotion. They have led

him to the indisputable conclusion that rather than original as farmans and pattas were acknowledged, these were mostly parwanas voicing follow-up action on the original grants. Their chronological arrangement showed gaps into which have sunk factors that went into their writing. What they best conveyed was information about the painters, patrons and functionaries through whom items of patronage became available to them. The terms, defining their engagement also found a mention in these documents. In the whole range of art history, they represented the only body of evidence that threw light upon the patronage the Sikh rulers extended to Pahari painters and the difficulties they faced in the new dispensation.

The process of deciphering and decoding to which Goswamy has subjected these documents reveals a lot about the polity of Ranjit Singh. As is evident from documents (I to X, XII) the beginning would invariably be with the invocation of Onkar or Akal Purkh standing for the universality and unity of God. In a couple of documents (XII, XIV) the Hindu deity, Shri Rama, is ivoked along with so as to convey the impression that the Hindu and Sikh views of God were identical. This impression was quite widespread otherwise it would not have figured in official documents. There is no denying the fact that such was the view that lurked in the popular imagination of the people. Had it not been so, the people of the Punjab would not have nurtured oneness that as per the following lines of Shah Mohammad they did with all the fond feelings at their command:

Hindus and Muslims have lived in peace

But a great disaster has befallen now. Punjab had never suffered, says the bard,

A third race's advent on its soil.

Another thing that comes as a pleasant surprise is that in the

documents (1, V, VI, VIII, IX, X, XI, XV), the seal affixed is in the name of the Immortal God. The name of the ruler, i.e. Ranjit Singh does not figure there at all. This shows that the project he embarked upon for setting up a sovereign kingdom did not have personal agenda. He claimed to do so for the glory of the Immortal God whom all the people, irrespective of their religious differences, cherished in the kingdom. This speaks of the pastsignificance of his project that very few rulers in history have shared with him. There accrues to it a present meaning as well. Who of the present rulers and politicians can claim to have foregone self-aggrandisement, power and pelf for the service of the people? In India Tipu Sultan might have been the only one with Ranjit Singh who put benevolence above everything else.

These documents are penned to the local functionary at the behest of someone assigned by Ranjit Singh to exercise authority over the Hill area. Since it is from a subordinate, so to show his order efficacious and veritable at the same time, the epistle tends to acquire a mandatory tone. Being subservient in hierarchy, he as in document (I) is careful to repeat verbal assurance got from a person like Dhian Singh Dogra who enjoyed great proximity with Ranjit Singh. Sometimes, as is evident from document (II) the local functionary is audacious and does not act upon the order. In that case, the person exercising authority assumes a harsh tone and instructs him to implement the order without any reluctance whatsoever.

Wherever in these documents (I, III, VI) the over-arching presence of Ranjit Singh is invoked, it is by putting his name without any apellation to exalt him. The appellation of *Raja* or *Maharaja* does not figure at all with his name because the value-system ordained in *Gurmat* did not lend to it any credence. No wonder his *vizirs* and suzerains had no compunction in appending it to their names. For Ranjit Singh such

appilations as Hazur, Sarkar, Sardar and Sahib sounded more prestigious. Along with past significance, this characteristic of Ranjit Singh had present meaning, worthy of note at the present historical juncture. The Akali government has squandered a vast amount of money, two hundred crores approximately, to celebrate the second centenary of Ranjit Singh's coronation as the Maharaja of the Punjab. The fact of the matter is that he neither wanted to be hailed as the Maharaja nor did he believe in coronation, an exercise in utter futility. By celebrating such a hypothetical event, the Akali government inflicted double injustice upon his memory, first by assuming him as the hero of the celebration he did not believe in and second by attributing him a belief to which he lent no credence at all.

The unostentatious way in which his name appears in these documents, leads us to recall further aspects of his exceptional career. Several historians of his times, including Sohan Lal Suri in whose magnum opus minor details of his daily routine are faithfully recorded, testify to the fact that Ranjit Singh never wore a crown upon his head. This was against his nature that maintained a vital contact with commonsense as well as the life of the common people. Likewise he never sat upon a throne however burnished or bright it might have been. Instead of these inanimate objects of startling grandeur, his fondness was reserved for animated beings, a horse or mare for that matter. No wonder, he waged a battle against the Afghan ruler of his times to wrest from him the legendary mare, probably known as Laila.

From the documents, there emerges a narrative about the making and unmaking of the painter's economic well-being. The earlier ones show how the *nazim*, acting as intermediatory for Ranjit Singh the patron in the final dispensation, is intent upon safeguarding the painter. He sees to it that the intention of the *parwana* be

implemented in its true spirit. Then complicating factors begin to intervene. The intermediatory himself becomes the patron and assigns grant from his own jagir in the plains. Little wonder, the treatment to be meted out tends to undergo a change. The painter's economic well-being improves but troubles begin to gather on other scores. As goes a hint in the document (VII), he gets implicated in a murder case. His benefactor approaches the nazim to get him exonerated and released. That to get his purpose served he has to indulge into a pleasantry verging on filial feeling, becomes evident from the document's content.

From an artist upon whom jagir is bestowed, the painter becomes the employee of the nazim or some other sardar in the court at Lahore. He shifts his residence to the plains but his jagir in the hill area remains intact. For all this his status does not get unenviable because the interest in his work does not flag. A drastic change takes place with the advent of the British. As several documents (XVI, XVIII, XVIII, XIX) make it abundantly clear, patronage vanishes. As the owner of the land, that earlier being as jagir, was exempt from revenue, he has to square his accounts with the authorities concerned. Since it is not in his nature to do so, he has to suffer botheration now, though ipso facto it does not cause any decline in his affluence. No wonder, these documents are received from petty functionaries of the revenue departments. Very impersonal and business-like, they are bereft of situations figuring in the earlier documents. As Goswamy underlines in his Notes to a document (XIX): "in the phraseology of these documents, one notices the gradual emergence of a standard form which then is followed as a matter of routine." So far as painting goes, this botheration acts as a distraction. The painter loses interest in his work. To engross himself in painting or portrait-making that earlier was his wont, does not interest this worldly

person now.

Except to make very brief remarks, those too of the introductory sort, Goswamy hardly says anything about the portraits and paintings now added to the new edition of the book. Apparently it seems that the Pahari painters composed them out of deep regard combined with awe for the subjects. Where this combination of regard and awe is intertwined, in the portrait or the painting it comes out immaculately. Ranjit Singh's portrait at the title page and 'Guru Gobind Singh on horseback' as frontispiece are flawless compositions of this sort. In spite of the fact that several deep colors are used in both, they do not give the impression of gorgeous ostentation. Ranjit Singh's portrait gives evidence of regality in conjunction with simplicity. Guru Gobind Singh's image of a hero, poet and prophet embedding both commonsense and good sense gets marvellously reflected in this work of Nainsukh, the most important of the Pahari painters.

Where awe in combination with regard is not fully internalized, or rather where awe seems to lurk in the foreground, the result is either a painting like "Sardar Jai Singh Kanhaiya conferring with hill chiefs", or a portrait as "Maharaja Sher Singh." In the former, the Sikh Sardar, regarded highly in the community, could not cut much ice in history due to his acute differences with Ranjit Singh. He is shown here in conference with the hill chiefs. He sits at the head of them all and has a sewadar holding a costly whisk over his head. He listens intently to the hill chiefs raising some crucial points. The Sikh Sardar, it seems, is in grasp of what they contend. Effort is made to show that this conference resolves all issues coming to the fore with the conquest of the Hill areas by the Sikhs. The portrait of Maharaja Sher Singh denotes the aftermath of this conquest, with the provision that the Hill people have accepted their subjugation. The gorgeous dress, ornaments

opulently there around the head, neck and shoulders, sharply raised moustaches and the left hand resting on the sword, are meant to confer this impression.

That this conquest was not totally symmetrical can be deconstructed from the painting ' A Sikh Chief carousing with a lady.' In the painting, the Sikh Chief sits on a golden colored diwan. By its side is another, grey-colored one, upon which a lady, presumably from the Hill area, sits in a responsive posture. She is richly bedecked whereas the chief is only sparsely dressed to show that he reserves the right to go on the initiative. The right knee of the lady touches the bare one of the chief whose right hand rests upon that of the lady. In his left hand he holds a cup meant for some intoxicating drink. The lady's left hand with the index finger raised seems to suggest that he should observe discretion. Her whole demeanour is meant to reverse the notoriety the ladies from the Hill area carried in the court at Lahore. As such literary masterpiece as 'Puran Bhagat', where the celebrated kissa by Kadar Yar seems to suggest that the women from the Hill areas charmed the rulers with their startling beauty, endangering the very stability of the kingdom. Their voluptuous charms, enticing looks and erotic gestures were beyond their control as well for they were the offspring of families from low castes. The lady in this painting seems to reverse the damning image become one with women from the Hill areas. This painting, significant for its deconstructive stance, was again composed by Nainsukh. As a result, he gets entitled to importance of the ideological import as well, whereas in this, otherwise valuable book, Goswamy has hailed only his prestige and the patronage he was bestowed upon in the Sikh Court.

> T.S. Gill is the Chief Editor of Desh Sevak