

CUET · FINE ARTS · CLASS XII · CODE 312

The Pahari Schools of Painting

CUET unit: The Pahari Schools of Painting (Basohli, Guler, Kangra and allied hill centres, 17th–19th c.)

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Snapshot

- "Pahari" means hilly/mountainous; refers to painting centres of the western Himalayas (Basohli, Guler, Kangra, Kullu, Chamba, Mankot, Nurpur, Mandi, Bilaspur, Jammu, Jasrota, Garhwal) active 17th–19th century.
- Pahari style evolved in three stages: bold flamboyant Basohli (late 17th c.) → refined Guler/pre-Kangra phase (early–mid 18th c.) → poetic Kangra School (1780s onward).
- B. N. Goswamy is the key scholar; he argued that the family of Pandit Seu (Shiv) and his sons Manaku and Nainsukh, not regional boundaries, shaped Pahari style.
- Major patrons: Raja Kirpal Pal (Basohli, 1678–1695), Raja Govardhan Chand (Guler, 1744–1773), Raja Balwant Singh (Jasrota, Nainsukh's patron), Raja Sansar Chand (Kangra, 1775–1823).
- CUET tests this topic through artist–patron pairings, school characteristics (Basohli's beetle-wing emeralds, Kangra's straight-nose female face), titles/dates/collections of named paintings and the Ashta Nayika/Baramasa themes.
- This is the third leg of the medieval-miniature triangle (Mughal–Rajasthani–Pahari) and closes the seventeenth- to nineteenth-century narrative before the Bengal School and Modern Indian Art.

Detailed Notes

2.1 Core concepts

NCERT opens by defining "Pahari" as hilly or mountainous in origin, an umbrella term covering Basohli, Guler, Kangra, Kullu, Chamba, Mankot, Nurpur, Mandi, Bilaspur and Jammu as the principal western-Himalayan centres of painting between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries (NCERT §Intro, p. 67). The style begins with the coarsely flamboyant Basohli idiom and blossoms — via what scholars call the Guler or pre-Kangra phase — into the most exquisite and sophisticated Kangra School. Unlike the Mughal, Deccani and Rajasthani schools, Pahari paintings present a challenge in territorial classification because Pahari centres did not develop as independent schools with distinctive styles, and there is a chronic paucity of dated material, colophons and inscriptions. NCERT explicitly cautions students that this absence of documentary

evidence makes confident regional categorisation difficult; political boundaries in the hills were also fluid (NCERT §Intro, p. 67).

Two observations help organise the Pahari corpus. Scholars widely accept that the Mughal and Rajasthani styles were known in the hills — Provincial Mughal works and family ties with Rajasthani courts indicate continual contact — but the flamboyantly bold Basohli-like idiom is generally taken as the earliest prevailing pictorial language. Beyond geography, the art historian B. N. Goswamy argued that the family of Pandit Seu (Shiv) was chiefly responsible for the course of Pahari paintings, and that identifying paintings by region is misleading; the family of artists is a better unit of style. In the early eighteenth century the Seu family conformed to the Basohli idiom; from the mid-eighteenth century the style transformed through a pre-Kangra phase and matured into the Kangra style — a change attributed not to Mughal-atelier migration into the hills but to the naturalism of newly introduced paintings that appealed to Pahari sensibilities (NCERT §Intro, pp. 67–68).

The Basohli School is the earliest. Raja Kirpal Pal (r. 1678–1695), an enlightened prince, patronised a distinctive style with strong primary colours, warm yellows for the background and horizon, stylised vegetation, raised white paint imitating pearls, and — most diagnostically — the use of tiny shiny green beetle-wing casings to depict jewellery and emeralds. The aesthetic shares features with the Chaurpanchashika group of Western India that students encountered in chapter 1 (NCERT §Basohli, p. 69). The most popular Basohli theme was the **Rasamanjari** of Bhanu Datta; in 1694–95 Devida, a **tarkhan** (carpenter-painter), executed a magnificent **Rasamanjari** series for Kirpal Pal. Other popular themes included the **Bhagvata Purana** and **Ragamala**; portraits of local kings with their consorts, courtiers, astrologers, mendicants and courtesans were also painted.

Basohli ateliers spread to Chamba and Kullu, producing local variations of the Basohli kalam. A new style — the Guler–Kangra phase — appeared during the 1690s to 1730s through experimentation that finally moulded into the Kangra style (NCERT §Basohli, p. 70). The Shangri Ramayana of the Kullu Valley (1680–1688 and 1690–1700) takes its name from Shangri, the residence of a branch of the Kullu royal family that originally owned the set. Kullu artists were influenced in varying degrees by both Basohli and Bilaspur styles, producing figures with prominent chin, wide open eyes and lavish grey and terracotta-red backgrounds.

The Guler School represents the second stage. The first quarter of the eighteenth century saw a complete transformation of the Basohli style, initiating the Guler–Kangra phase under Raja Govardhan Chand (r. 1744–1773) of Guler, a high-ranking branch of the Kangra royal family. Pandit Seu, with his sons Manak (also called Manaku) and Nainsukh, is credited with the change around 1730–40 to a more refined, subdued and elegant style (NCERT §Guler, p. 72). Nainsukh became the court painter of Raja Balwant Singh of Jasrota and is held responsible for shaping the Guler School emphatically. The most matured version of the style entered Kangra during the 1780s, becoming the Kangra School, while offshoots of Basohli continued in Chamba and Kullu.

Manaku's most outstanding work is a **Gita Govinda** series painted in 1730 at Guler. It retains key elements of Basohli style — most strikingly the lavish use of beetle-wing casings — even as it shifts toward the new refined idiom (NCERT §Guler, p. 73).

Nainsukh's genius lay in individual portraiture: Balwant Singh performing puja, surveying a building site, wrapped in a quilt — intimate studies that are a salient feature of the later Pahari style. Nainsukh's palette comprised delicate pastel shades with daring expanses of white or grey, producing a distinctively modernist clarity centuries ahead of its time (NCERT §Guler, pp. 73–74).

The Kangra School flowered under Raja Sansar Chand (r. 1775–1823) of the Katoch dynasty, who ascended the throne at age ten after his grandfather Ghamand Chand restored the kingdom and founded Tira Sujanpur on the river Beas. Manaku and his sons joined Sansar Chand after Prakash Chand of Guler faced a financial crisis (NCERT §Kangra, p. 74). Tira Sujanpur became the most prolific Kangra centre; earlier-phase paintings come from Alampur and mature ones from Nadaun — all on the Beas. Comparatively less production took place at Kangra itself, which remained under Mughal control until 1786 and was later annexed by the Sikhs.

The Kangra style is widely regarded as the most poetic and lyrical of all Indian styles, marked by serene beauty, delicacy of line, brilliance of colour and minute decorative detail. Its single most distinctive feature — appearing from around the 1790s — is the female face shown with a straight nose in line with the forehead, a profile convention that has become emblematic of Kangra painting. Popular themes are the **Bhagvata Purana**, **Gita Govinda**, **Nala Damayanti**, **Bihari Satsai**, **Ragamala** and **Baramasa**. Fattu, Purkhu and Khushala are the important named Kangra painters. The style spread from Tira Sujanpur eastward to Garhwal and westward to Kashmir (NCERT §Kangra, p. 75).

Painting activity was severely affected around 1805 when the Gurkhas besieged Kangra fort and Sansar Chand fled to Tira Sujanpur. In 1809, with Ranjit Singh's military help, the Gurkhas were driven away, but the later Kangra work no longer paralleled the masterpieces of 1785–1805 (NCERT §Kangra, pp. 75–76). The Kangra **Bhagvata Purana** series shows effortless naturalism and deft figures in unusual poses; the principal master is believed to be a descendant of Nainsukh. The **Rasa Panchadhyayi** — five chapters from the **Bhagvata Purana** on the philosophical concept of Rasa — inspired one famous Guler–Kangra folio (1780–85) in which gopis re-enact Krishna's lilas: Putana's killing, the Yamala-Arjun liberation, the lifting of Mount Govardhan, the subduing of Kaliya (NCERT §Kangra, pp. 76–77).

The Ashta Nayikas (eight heroines) constitute a major Pahari theme. NCERT names Utka, Svandhinpatika, Vasaksajja, Kalahantarita and Abhisarika as the most flamboyantly painted; Abhisarika — the heroine who hastens to her beloved braving all hazards — is singled out as the most striking. The Kangra **Abhisarika Nayika** (1810–20, Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh) shows the heroine moving through a dark forest at night, lightning flashing overhead. Baramasa paintings — twelve folios, one per month — became popular in the nineteenth-century hills; Keshav Das's tenth chapter of the

Kavipriya is the key textual source, with the hot month of Jyeshtha (May–June) as a recurring favourite (NCERT §Kangra, pp. 77–78).

The Kangra School came to the fore in the 1780s; offshoots of the Basohli style continued at Chamba, Kullu, Nurpur, Mankot, Jasrota, Mandi, Bilaspur and Jammu. In Kashmir (1846–1885) the Kangra style initiated a local school of Hindu book illumination; the Sikhs eventually employed Kangra painters. Three broad styles — Basohli, Guler and Kangra — serve as indicative centres. Jasrota's Guler-style work falls under the Guler School. Kullu had figures with prominent chin, wide open eyes and lavish grey and terracotta-red backgrounds (the Shangri Ramayana). Nurpur retained Basohli's vibrant colours with Kangra's dainty figure types. Mankot received Basohli artists through marital relations. The Mandi rulers were ardent Vishnu and Shiva devotees, producing Krishna-lila and Shaivite themes. Molaram is the celebrated name associated with the Garhwal School, which was influenced by Sansar Chand's Kangra style (NCERT §pp. 78–79).

Three case-study paintings round out the topic: **Awaiting Krishna and the Hesitant Radha** from Manaku's **Gita Govinda** (Guler–Kangra phase, with a translated inscription on its reverse, p. 81); **Balwant Singh looking at a Painting with Nainsukh** (a rare self-inclusion by Nainsukh, depicting Balwant Singh smoking a hukka in his palace, p. 82); and **Nanda, Yashoda and Krishna** (a Bhagvata Purana scene of Nanda's family moving to Vrindavan, whose flush-cut, photograph-like composition exemplifies the mature Kangra naturalism, p. 83).

2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Pahari	Hilly / mountainous in origin; western-Himalayan painting centres 17th–19th c.	67
Basohli kalam	Earliest Pahari idiom: bold flamboyant primary colours, beetle-wing emeralds	69
Tarkhan	Carpenter-painter (Devda, painter of the 1694–95 Rasamanjari)	69
Guler–Kangra phase	Transitional refined style initiated c. 1730–40 by Pandit Seu's family	72
Kangra kalam	Mature lyrical Pahari style; straight-nose female face from c. 1790s	75
Rasamanjari	Bhanu Datta's text; most popular Basohli theme	69
Rasa Panchadhyayi	Five chapters of Bhagvata Purana on Rasa	76
Ashta Nayikas	Eight heroines in eight emotive states	77
Utka	Nayika who anticipates her beloved	77
Svandhinpatika	Nayika whose husband is subject to her will	77
Vasaksajja	Nayika who decorates the bed	77

Term	Definition	Page
Kalahantarita	Nayika repentant after a quarrel	77
Abhisarika	Nayika braving hazards to meet beloved	78
Baramasa	12-folio series, one per month	78
Kavipriya (Ch. 10)	Keshav Das's text source for Baramasa	78
Beetle-wing casings	Basohli emerald-jewellery technique	69
Raised white paint	Basohli pearl-jewellery technique	69
Warm yellow horizon	Basohli backdrop convention	69
Tira Sujanpur	Sansar Chand's most prolific Kangra centre, on river Beas	75
Alampur	Earlier-phase Kangra centre on Beas	75
Nadaun	Mature-phase Kangra centre on Beas	75
Katoch dynasty	Kangra royal house (Sansar Chand)	74
Pandit Seu	Patriarch of the Pahari artist family	68
Manaku (Manak)	Pandit Seu's son; 1730 Gita Govinda at Guler	72–73
Nainsukh	Pandit Seu's son; court painter to Balwant Singh of Jasrota	72

2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

Plates and paintings the candidate should recognise visually: **Krishna steals butter**, Bhagvata Purana, 1750, N. C. Mehta Collection, Ahmedabad (chapter opener, p. 67); **Rama and Sita in the forest**, Kangra, 1780, Douglas Barrett Collection, UK (p. 68); **Rasamanjari**, Basohli, 1720, British Museum, London (p. 69); **Rama gives away his possessions**, Ayodhya Kanda, Shangri Ramayana, 1690–1700, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (p. 70); **Rama and Lakshmana following sage Vishvamitra to the forest**, Bala Kanda, Shangri Ramayana, 1680–1688, Raja Raghubir Singh Collection, Shangri, Kullu Valley (p. 71); **Balwant Singh in prayer** by Nainsukh, 1750, V&A, London (p. 72); **Krishna embracing gopis**, Gita Govinda, Guler, 1760–65, N. C. Mehta Collection (p. 73); **Kaliya Mardana**, Bhagvata Purana, Kangra, 1785, National Museum (p. 74); **Krishna playing Holi with gopis**, Kangra, 1800, National Museum (p. 75); **Re-enacting Krishna's deeds**, Bhagvata Purana, Guler–Kangra, 1780–85, Private Collection (p. 76); **Abhisarika Nayika**, Kangra, 1810–20, Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh (p. 77); **A couple in the month of Jyestha**, Kangra, 1800, National Museum (p. 78); plus the three case-study paintings on pp. 81, 82 and 83.

The three-stage stylistic evolution should be memorised in chronological order: Basohli (late 17th c.) → Guler/pre-Kangra phase (c. 1730–40 onward) → Kangra (1780s onward, mature 1785–1805, decline post-1805 Gurkha siege).

2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- Pandit Seu's sons are Manak (= Manaku) and Nainsukh — not "Manaku and Manak" as separate people, and not Khushala/Fattu (Khushala, Fattu and Gaudhu are Manaku's and Nainsukh's sons, working in Prakash Chand's court).
- The Guler style is a transformation of Basohli initiated under Raja Govardhan Chand (Guler), but Nainsukh's mature Guler style developed at JASROTA under Balwant Singh — students often place all of Nainsukh's career at Guler.
- The diagnostic Kangra female-face feature (straight nose in line with forehead) appeared c. 1790s, NOT from the start of the Kangra School in the 1780s.
- Beetle-wing casings are the hallmark of Basohli — but Manaku's 1730 Gita Govinda at Guler retains this Basohli feature. A trap question may exclusively attribute beetle wings to Basohli.
- Raja Sansar Chand ruled Kangra 1775–1823 and lost painting momentum after the 1805 Gurkha siege; the most masterly Kangra period is 1785–1805, not the entire reign.
- Shangri Ramayana = Kullu (not Basohli or Guler), even though Kullu artists were influenced by Basohli and Bilaspur.
- Devida is the painter of the 1694–95 Rasamanjari for Kirpal Pal — and he was a TARKHAN (carpenter-painter), not a Brahmin or Rajput by occupation.
- Abhisarika braves HAZARDS (forest, night, lightning) — not just bad weather.
- Tira Sujanpur is on the river BEAS — not the Sutlej or the Ravi.
- B. N. GOSWAMY is the scholar associated with the family-of-artists thesis. CUET may swap him with Karl Khandalavala or W. G. Archer.
- The 1805 Gurkha siege drove Sansar Chand to Tira Sujanpur; Ranjit Singh expelled the Gurkhas in 1809.
- The Kashmir local school of Hindu book illumination flourished 1846–1885 under Kangra influence.

2.5 Key artworks / artists

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Raja Kirpal Pal (patron)	1678–1695, Basohli	Enlightened prince; Rasamanjari patron	69
Devida (tarkhan, artist)	1694–95, Basohli	Painted Rasamanjari for Kirpal Pal	69
Rasamanjari, Basohli	1720	British Museum; beetle-wing emeralds	69
Shangri Ramayana, Kullu	1680–1700	Bala Kanda and Ayodhya Kanda	70–71

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Pandit Seu (artist)	Early 18th c., Guler	Patriarch of Pahari artist family	68
Manaku (Manak)	1730, Guler	Gita Govinda set with beetle wings	73
Nainsukh	Mid-18th c., Guler/Jasrota	Court painter to Balwant Singh; intimate portraits	72
Balwant Singh in prayer	1750, Nainsukh	V&A London; pastel-grey palette	72
Balwant Singh (patron)	Mid-18th c., Jasrota	Nainsukh's chief patron	72
Raja Govardhan Chand (patron)	1744–1773, Guler	Patron of Guler refinement	72
Krishna embracing gopis, Gita Govinda	1760–65, Guler	N. C. Mehta Collection	73
Raja Sansar Chand (patron)	1775–1823, Kangra	Katoch dynasty; flowering of Kangra	74
Fattu, Purkhu, Khushala	Kangra	Named Kangra masters	75
Kaliya Mardana, Bhagvata Purana	1785, Kangra	National Museum; deft naturalism	74
Krishna playing Holi with gopis	1800, Kangra	National Museum	75
Re-enacting Krishna's deeds	1780–85, Guler–Kangra	Rasa Panchadhyayi inspiration	76
Abhisarika Nayika	1810–20, Kangra	Chandigarh Government Museum	77
A couple in the month of Jyestha	1800, Kangra	Baramasa, National Museum	78
Awaiting Krishna and the Hesitant Radha	Manaku, Guler–Kangra	Case-study folio with inscription	81
Balwant Singh looking at a Painting with Nainsukh	Nainsukh	Rare self-inclusion of artist	82
Nanda, Yashoda and Krishna	Kangra Bhagvata	Flush-cut photograph-like composition	83
Molaram	Garhwal	Famous Garhwal painter under Kangra influence	79
B. N. Goswamy (scholar)	20th c.	"Family of artists" thesis	68
Ghamand Chand			74

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
	Pre-Sansar Chand, Kangra	Restored Katoch kingdom; founded Tira Sujanpur	

Practice MCQs

PYQ Alignment

CUET reliably draws from this chapter on Pahari schools every year — typically two to three direct factual MCQs on Basohli's beetle-wing emeralds, Manaku/Nainsukh's parentage and patronage, Sansar Chand's dates and Kangra's straight-nose female face, plus one or two match-the-following items pairing named paintings (Rasamanjari, Shangri Ramayana, Kaliya Mardana, Krishna playing Holi) with their schools and collections. CUET 2024 set an Assertion-Reason on the territorial-classification challenge; CUET 2025 included an Abhisarika identification question.

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