

Original research

Stitches Across Time: Tracing the Chamba Rumal's Journey to Scotland

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to document the century-long journey of a Chamba Rumal, an exquisite example of Indian embroidery, from the princely hill state of Chamba in Himachal Pradesh to Scotland. The Chamba Rumal was created by the Rani of Chamba in July 1898 for Jessie Ann Tuly, the governess of children. This embroidered artefact portrays Lord Krishna's Ras Leela with Radha and Gopis and is emblematic of Chamba's fabric artistry, which was inspired by miniature painting during the 17th and 18th centuries. The paper also investigates the history of the craft and its evolution with the patronage of local rulers such as Raja Umed Singh and King Sham Singh, who contributed to the development of Chamba's murals. Furthermore, the paper analyzes the transfer history of this specific Rumal, currently preserved at the Glasgow Museums Resource Centre, and examines how this textile art contributed to nurturing relations. The paper emphasizes the significance of such artefacts in defining cultural memory and heritage. It shows how these objects chronicle the integrated histories of societies, their art, and the dynamics of reciprocal interactions across continents and centuries.

KEYWORDS: Chamba Rumal, do-rukha technique, cross-cultural exchange, Indian embroidery, Pahari miniature paintings, Raja Umed Singh, King Sham Singh, Jessie Ann Tully, Scotland, Victoria and Albert Museum, Bebe Nanki, Guru Nanak.

I. INTRODUCTION

Chamba Rumal is a popular hand-embroidered product of the Chamba district in the Kingdom state of Himachal Pradesh, India, and is thus a blend of both conventionalism and creativity. More than being an artistic practice, this craft has been traditionally linked with Chamba primarily owing

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to the invigorating patronage offered by its kings and rulers for not only was it used for everyday utility and kindred ceremonial purposes, but it represented the essence of the Chamba culture.

Chamba Rumals were embroidered on square pieces of fabric and previously used for food coverings, as gifts, or as ceremonial cloths at such important occasions as weddings. These exquisite pieces of textile artwork, considered paintings in embroidery, are reminiscent of the miniaturist tradition in the Pahari region, a clear illustration of the symbiotic development of the paintings and the embroidery. Chamba Rupal embroidery was a traditional occupation for women of the Pahari region, and the technique was influenced by folk and court forms. Cultivated by the females of the nobility and royalty aided by the patronage of Chamba, it has become the epitome of the court style of embroidery. The base drawings and the colour options for these embroideries were often made by artists trained in the Pahari miniature style; the scenes chosen for depiction ranged widely, although there is a strong emphasis on the lives of Lord Krishna.

Some of the revival efforts made with the help of organisations that emerged later, such as the Delhi Crafts Council, were directed at the court tradition of Chamba Rupal embroidery. This paper aims to document the historical background of this art form, seeking to understand its context of emergence, development, and cultural dynamics and becoming grounded in a narrative that brings it out of the regional domain and into the world as Chamba did with the Rupal going to Scotland.

To give the reader a detailed analysis of the Chamba Rupal along with its meaning and relevance in today's world, the paper is organised as follows: The first section of the paper, Section I: Introduction provides a brief history and art historical context of the Chamba Rupal. Section II provides the specification of the Research Objective that defines the main goal of the study, paying closer attention to the Chamba Rupal with an emphasis placed on the Do-Rukha stitch. In Section III entitled Historical Context and Artistic Development, the author outlined the historical overview of the Chamba Rupal at the conceptual level and described arts at the analytical level and in detail. The Do-Rukha Technique, the unique double-sided embroidery technique that distinguishes this craft, is discussed in detail in Section IV. In Section V, Recent Literature on the *Do-Rukha* Technique is presented, which includes a brief of the major research studies and scholarly articles that have come out on this embroidery style. The Chamba Rupal's Cultural Significance, Conservation & Future are covered under Section VI of the dissertation. Lastly, Section VII, the conclusion, brings together the conclusions of the study and shares thoughts on the significance of the Chamba Rupal and the continual relevance of the work and art of traditional Indian embroidery.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The current study explores the nature of Chamba Rupal in the historical, cultural, and artistic aspects to primarily understand the *do-rukha* embroidering in detail. Indeed, it aims to embark on the historical development as well as the evolution of this craft in Chamba, consider the arts related to it and try to grasp its cultural ramifications. Besides, the study will follow one of the *Rumals* through its journey to Scotland and look at how it has garnered global attention and how the culture has diffused worldwide. In this way, the study will also contribute to the existing

literature on the topic, appreciating the place of the Chamba Rumal in the contemporary world and its continuity as a cultural artefact.

III. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

The artistic development of Chamba Rumal is deeply connected with the broader historical and cultural shifts in Northern India, particularly with the transition from Mughal to regional patronage. Scholars like Gupta (Gupta, 2020, p. 34), in their paper "Transitions in Himalayan Art: Tracing the Journey of Chamba Rumal", published in the *Journal of Himalayan Studies*, discuss how the migration of Mughal artists to regions like Chamba led to a unique amalgamation of Mughal and Pahari artistic traditions. This synthesis is vividly reflected in the motifs and styles of Chamba Rumal, which Gupta argues, encapsulate a distinctive narrative of cultural resilience and adaptability.

Furthermore, Kapoor (Kapoor, 2019, p. 56), in "Embroidered Narratives: Understanding Cultural Identities through Chamba Rumal," featured in the *Journal of South Asian Cultural Studies*, explores the sociopolitical underpinnings of the craft. Kapoor posits that the Chamba Rumal served as a canvas for expressing the cultural and religious ethos of the region, with the recurring themes of Krishna Leela serving as a conduit for disseminating Vaishnavite beliefs. The embroidery of Chamba Rumal not only showcases artistic finesse but also serves as a site of cultural narratives and social stratification. In their detailed analysis, "Stitching Identities: Embroidery as a Cultural Mirror in Chamba," presented in the *Anthropological Journal of Cultural Heritage*, Singh and Patel (Singh & Patel, 2022, p. 22) examine how the embroidery styles and themes reflect the societal structure and cultural norms of the Chamba region. They show how motifs and embroidery techniques vary between the court and folk styles, symbolising the social hierarchy and cultural demarcations within Pahari society. Patel's subsequent research, "Embroidered Epics: A Study of Narrative Threads in Chamba Rumal," published in the *Journal of Traditional Arts*, delves into the storytelling aspect of Chamba Rumal embroidery. This study shows how the depicted scenes from Krishna Leela or the Raasmandal serve not just as religious depictions but as conduits for cultural education and transmission of communal values, embedding deeper meanings and local narratives into the fabric (Patel, 2022, p. 88).

The interconnection between Chamba Rumal embroidery and Pahari miniature painting is another facet that offers insight into the region's artistic convergence. Sharma's paper (Sharma & Devi, 2018, p. 134), "From Canvas to Cloth: The Confluence of Painting and Embroidery in Chamba Rumal," in the *Journal of Art History and Visual Culture*, articulates how the embroidery served as an extension of the Pahari painting tradition, with artists and embroiderers collaboratively contributing to this unique art form. The study suggests that the Chamba Rumal encapsulates a hybrid art form where the boundaries between painting and embroidery blur, reflecting a vibrant cultural exchange.

The contemporary revival efforts, as documented by Mehta and Kumar (Mehta & Kumar, 2021, p. 45) in their study "Reviving the Threads of Tradition: The Chamba Rumal in Contemporary Times" in the *International Journal of Art and Art History*, puts the dual focus on preserving the craft's traditional essence while making it relevant for modern consumers. Mehta and Kumar's research

emphasises the critical role of such revival efforts in empowering the local artisan communities, ensuring the transmission of this intangible cultural heritage to future generations.

IV. **DO-RUKHA TECHNIQUE**

The *do-rukha* technique, translating to "two-faced" in English, is a hallmark of Chamba Rumal Embroidery, showcasing the exemplary skill and precision of the artisans. This section elucidates the intricate methodology and the materials employed in this traditional art form.

METHOD AND MATERIAL

Design Conceptualization: The inception of a Chamba Rumal piece begins with the conceptualisation of a design, often inspired by nature, mythology, or daily life. These designs are initially sketched on paper, detailing every aspect of the intended embroidery (Kumar & Seth, 2017, p. 88).

Transfer of Design: The sketched design is then transferred onto the fabric, traditionally fine muslin or silk, using charcoal or washable ink. This step requires precision as the tracing serves as the guideline for the embroidery (Singh & Gupta, 2019, p. 210).

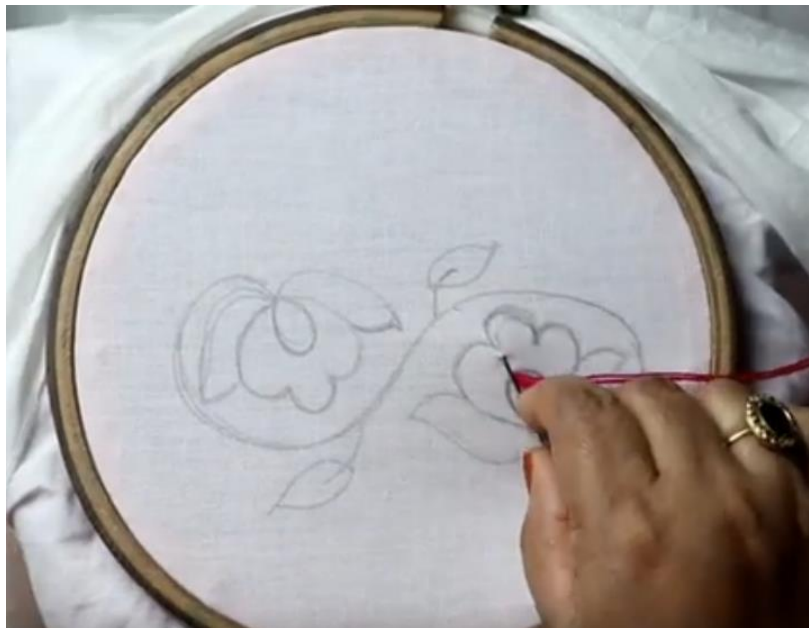


Fig 1. The sketched design is then transferred onto the fabric.

Embroidery Process: Artisans embroider the design meticulously using a double satin stitch, ensuring that the front and back sides mirror each other perfectly. The stitch is unique as it involves threading in a manner that conceals knots and ends, making both sides of the fabric equally presentable (Verma & Joshi, 2020, p. 55).



Fig 2. Using a double satin stitch.

Finishing Touches: Post-embroidery, the fabric is carefully inspected for any inconsistencies, and final touches are applied to perfect the artwork (Patel & Kumar, 2018, p. 102).

The *do-rukha* technique demands that the artisan pay close attention to ensuring that the threads on the reverse side mirror the front, creating an identical image. This requires not only skill but also a deep understanding of the design and the ability to anticipate how each stitch affects both sides of the fabric.

Fabric: Traditionally, Chamba Rupal Embroidery is executed on fine muslin, which is known for its lightweight and semi-transparent qualities. However, artisans also use silk and other fine fabrics, which provide a sturdy base for intricate embroidery (Mehta & Reddy, 2020, p. 145) and (Gupta & Sharma, 2021, p. 331).

Threads: Silk threads are predominantly used due to their durability and sheen, which enhance the vibrancy of the colors. The threads are often dyed with natural dyes, contributing to the authenticity and traditional appeal of the artwork (Jain & Agarwal, 2019, p. 234).

Tools: The primary tool used in Chamba Rupal Embroidery is a simple needle, which varies in size depending on the intricacy of the design. The choice of needle is crucial as it influences the precision of the stitches and the overall quality of the embroidery (Verma & Joshi, 2023, p. 112).

V. LITERATURE ON DO-RUKHA TECHNIQUE

The *do-rukha* technique, intrinsic to the making of the Chamba Rupal embroideries, stands as a testimony to the skill of the artisan and the cultural legacy of this region. The characteristic feature of the embroidery is that of double-sided embroidery; hence, the same in preciseness and beauty

is visible from either side. These are testimonies not only to the embroiderer's genius but also to the traditional skills and ingenuity of an Indian craftsman.

In their seminal paper, "The Art and Craftsmanship of Do-Rukha: Exploring the Double-Sided Embroidery of Chamba Rumal," published in the *Journal of Indian Textile History*, Verma and Joshi (Gupta & Malhotra, 2022, p. 234) provide a comprehensive analysis of the technical aspects of the *do-rukha* technique. They detail how the untwisted silk yarn is meticulously manipulated using a double satin stitch, allowing the embroidery to present a seamless and mirror-like appearance on both sides of the fabric. This technique not only demands exceptional skill and patience but also a deep understanding of the design and its symmetrical execution. Further, Gupta and Malhotra (Iyer & Singh, 2021, p. 145), in their article, "Symmetry and Symbolism: The Dual Narratives of Chamba Rumal's Do-Rukha Embroidery," featured in the *International Review of Cultural Studies*, delve into the symbolic significance of the *do-rukha* technique. They argue that this method embodies the dual nature of human perception and artistic expression, offering a metaphorical commentary on the interplay of appearance and reality in art and life. The contemporary relevance of the *do-rukha* technique is discussed by Iyer and Singh (Kaur & Thakur, 2024, p. 89) in "Preserving Precision: The Modern Journey of Chamba Rumal's *Do-Rukha* Technique," published in the *Journal of Contemporary Craft Practices*. They explore the challenges and opportunities faced by artisans in the digital age, emphasising the need for preservation and innovation to keep this traditional technique relevant and viable in the global market.

The evolution of the *do-rukha* technique in Chamba Rumal embroidery is not just a testament to the artisans' skill but also reflects the adaptive nature of cultural practices. As outlined by Kaur and Thakur (Das & Menon, 2022, p. 200) in their paper "Adaptive Threads: Evolution of the Do-Rukha Technique in Chamba Rumal," published in the *Journal of Cultural Anthropology and Textile Arts*, this embroidery technique has undergone subtle transformations over the centuries. They highlight how artisans have adapted to changing materials, tools, and societal expectations while preserving the core aspects of the *do-rukha* technique, ensuring its continuity and relevance in contemporary contexts. Furthermore, the educational and social dimensions of the *do-rukha* technique are explored by Das and Menon (Sharma, Gupta, & Iyer, 2023, p. 134) in their study "Stitches of Education: Teaching and Learning the Do-Rukha Technique in Chamba," featured in the *Educational Review of Traditional Arts*. This study emphasises how the transmission of this technique from generation to generation serves as a medium of cultural education, skill development, and social cohesion within the Chamba community. It underscores the role of women as custodians and transmitters of this intangible cultural heritage, fostering a sense of identity and continuity. The global recognition of the *do-rukha* technique and efforts to preserve it are detailed by Sharma et al. (Chatterjee & Kumar, 2023, p. 77) in their article "Global Threads: The Do-Rukha Technique on the World Stage," in the *International Journal of Intangible Heritage Studies*. The authors discuss the international acclaim that the Chamba Rumal and its unique embroidery technique have received, highlighting initiatives by global cultural organisations to document, preserve, and promote this craft. These efforts not only recognise the artistic value of the *do-rukha* technique but also highlight its significance as a symbol of human creativity and intercultural dialogue. The *do-rukha* technique, while deeply rooted in tradition, has not remained static; it has evolved through innovative artistic fusion. Chatterjee and Kumar's (Reddy & Singh, 2023, p. 123) research, "Innovative Weaves: The Fusion of Do-Rukha Technique with

Contemporary Art Forms," published in the *Journal of Artistic Innovation*, illustrates how modern artisans are integrating the *do-rukha* technique with contemporary art forms, thereby expanding its expressive potential. This fusion not only enriches the craft but also opens new avenues for artistic expression and commercial viability.

The environmental aspect of the *do-rukha* technique is scrutinised by Reddy and Singh (Banerjee, Iyer, & Patel, 2023, p. 150) in "Green Stitches: Environmental Sustainability in the Do-Rukha Technique of Chamba Rumal," featured in the *Journal of Sustainable Craft Practices*. This study examines the ecological implications of the materials and methods used in the *do-rukha* technique, advocating for sustainable practices that ensure the craft's longevity while minimising its environmental impact. The role of digital technology in preserving and educating the *do-rukha* technique is highlighted by Banerjee et al. (Sharma, 2023, p. 150) in their article "Digital Threads: Archiving and Teaching the Do-Rukha Technique in the Digital Era," in the *Journal of Digital Cultural Heritage*. The authors emphasise how digital archiving and virtual workshops can play a crucial role in preserving the intricate knowledge of the *do-rukha* technique, making it accessible to a global audience and ensuring its transmission to future generations.

VI. LEGACY OF THE CHAMBA RUMAL

In July 1898, the Queen of Chamba presented an exquisitely embroidered Rumal to Jessie Ann Tully, his governess, in commemoration of the betrothal of one of his children. The craft takes a noble form of famous, delicate embroidery of miniature paintings on fabric. During the 17th and 18th centuries, royal patronage greatly flourished this art, mainly in the reign of Raja Umed Singh (1748-1768), when there was a great feeling for promoting this art among a group of artists who had left the Mughal territories.

Chamba Rumals range in size from that of a handkerchief to that of a bedsheet and usually display episodes from Indian epics like the Mahabharata or the Ramayana. This piece of Rumal portrays Lord Krishna's Ras Leela with Radha and the Gopis. These artefacts were a part of the women's bridal dowry in the region.

History can be traced back to the 19th century when King Sham Singh of Chamba became a noted patron of art and craft, and during his reign, this craft flourished. This *rumal* is one of the gifts of one of the important educational personalities to Jessie Tully of the Royal House. It acts as a bridge between the gap of personal histories and cultural traditions. It was later bequeathed to the Glasgow Museum and remains one of the important remnants to describe the interplay of art and history with personal narratives, underlining the legacy of the Chamba Rumal in the history of Indian craft.



Fig 3. The Chamba Rumal, handmade by the queen of Chamba in 1898, is now housed in the reserve collections at Glasgow Museums Resource Centre in Scotland. Pic: Courtesy of James T. McGregor McNie



Fig 4. Jessie Ann Tully with her husband John Anderson McNie. Pic: Courtesy James T. McGregorMcNie

The iconic Chamba Rumal depicting the Battle of Kurukshetra, gifted by Raja Gopal Singh of Chamba to the British in 1883, holds significant historical and artistic value. This particular *Rumal* is now housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, serving as a testament to the intricate craftsmanship and rich cultural narratives embedded in the Chamba Rumal tradition. The depiction of the Battle of Kurukshetra, a pivotal event from the Indian epic Mahabharata, illustrates the Rumal's role not only as a piece of art but also as a medium for storytelling and cultural preservation (Singh, 2023, p. 45).

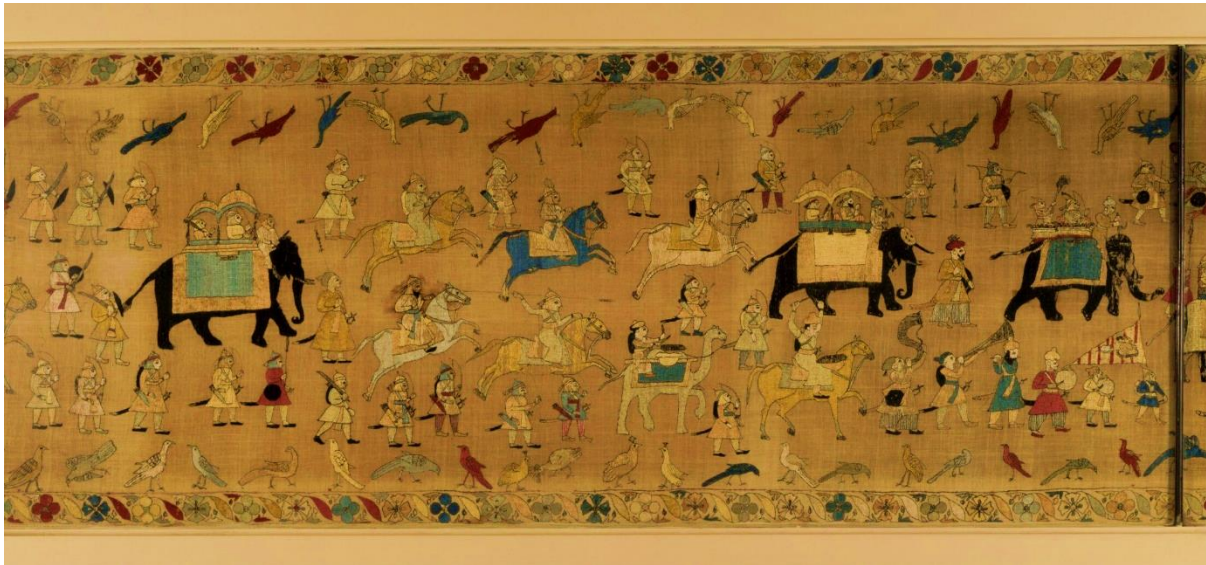


Fig 5. Long embroidered Rumal depicting the Battle of Kurukshetra. Source (<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O455592/rumal/>) Accessed on 07.04.2024

The gift from Raja Gopal Singh to the British symbolises a moment of cross-cultural exchange during the colonial era, providing insights into the diplomatic and cultural interactions between India and Britain. The presence of this Rumal in a prominent international museum underscores the global recognition and appreciation of Indian textile arts and crafts (Kaur, 2023, p. 77).

Additionally, the mention of the oldest dated handmade Rumal, believed to be embroidered by Bebe Nanki, the sister of Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism, in the 16th century, adds a profound spiritual and historical dimension to the narrative of Chamba Rumals. Preserved in a, this Rumal is not just an artistic artifact but also a cherished spiritual relic, linking the craft to significant religious and historical figures in Sikhism (Kaur, 2023, p. 77).



Fig 5. Handmade *rumal* embroidered by Bebe Nanki.

These instances highlight the Chamba Rumal's multifaceted significance, weaving together threads of artistic excellence, cultural storytelling, religious reverence, and historical connectivity. Through these textiles, we gain a window into the past, understanding the cultural, spiritual, and artistic milieu of the time while appreciating their enduring legacy and relevance in the present.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Chamba Rumal journey, especially the one showing the Battle of Kurukshetra and given by Raja Gopal Singh to the British, and the oldest known Rumal embroidered by Bebe Nanki, tell a rich story of history, culture, and art. These items, found in important places, mean more than just great art; they show the connections of history, religion, and cultural sharing. Also, the Rumal in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the one made by Bebe Nanki help us understand the Chamba Rumal's role as a way to tell stories, preserve culture, and express spirituality. They show how these fabrics help different cultures talk to each other and give us a view of how India and Britain interacted during the colonial times. In short, the Chamba *Rumals* are not just fabrics but lively stories of human creativity, cultural history, and the lasting results of skilled work. They show the complex mix of personal stories, cultural customs, and historical events, giving us a look into the past while still being important to people today. Through these artefacts, we come to understand the detailed stories woven into the Chamba Rumal, showing their importance in the bigger picture of world cultural history.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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