



LALIT KALĀ SERIES PORTFOLIO NO. 1

THE BHĀGAVATA PURĀNA  
IN KANGRA PAINTING

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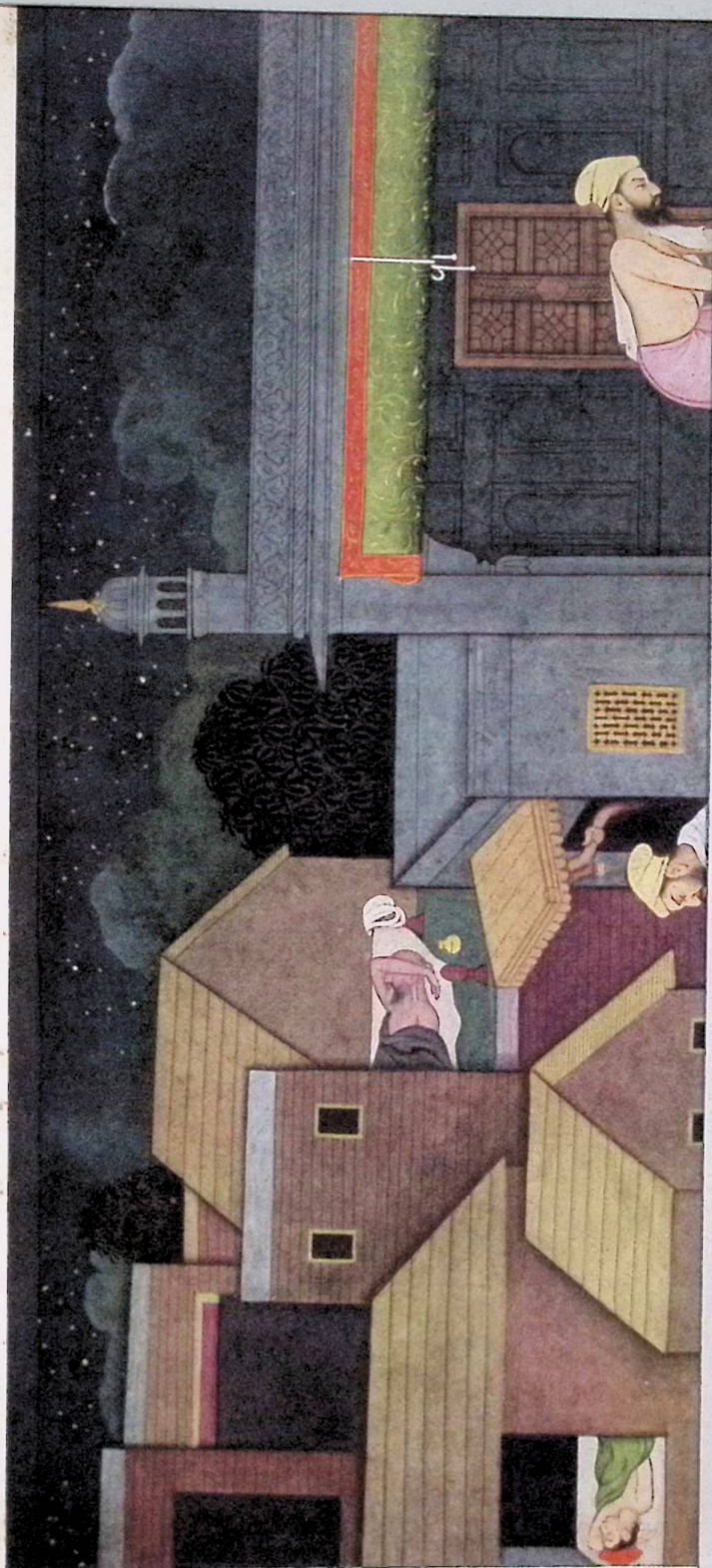
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## THE BHĀGAVATA PURĀNA IN KANGRA PAINTING

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is the great repository of the Kṛishṇa legend. The eighteen *purāṇas* are theogonical treatises which include the genealogies of royal families. They are rooted in antiquity. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, apart from describing creation, recounting the incarnations of Viṣṇu and narrating other mythological stories, is famous for its account of the feats and amours of the cowherd god Kṛishṇa. The tenth *skanda* (section) deals with his birth and early life while the eleventh *skanda* tells of the destruction of the Yādava race to which Kṛishṇa belonged and his tragic end. In the dim past there must have been two separate themes, one of the divine cowherd Gopāla-Kṛishṇa of Vraja and the other of a legendary king Vāsudeva-Kṛishṇa of the Yādava race, who, being forced to leave Mathura by powerful foes, founded the city of Dvaraka on the western sea coast. These legends were merged at some later date into a composite tradition such as we find in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. But the *Purāṇa* is not merely a story book. It has been the most powerful force in the development of the *Bhakti* cult which became the refuge of millions, for it spoke the same simple message of hope to the learned and the unlearned, to the rich and the poor, to the Brāhmin and the outcaste. They who love the Lord unquestioningly, unfettered by earthly ties, undismayed by earthly sorrows, untroubled by the why and wherefore of existence, need no other path to salvation. The Kṛishṇa legend in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, apart from its intrinsic charm as a story, is a simple allegory of the religion of god-love. Kṛishṇa is not a distant, awesome, unapproachable deity. He is one of the village children, one of the village cowherds, one of the village romantic swains. He will, for ever, wander in the groves of Vṛindāvana and dance with the fair maids of Vraja.

The tenth *skanda*, after describing the birth of Kṛishṇa and his miraculous removal to safety at Vraja (Pl. I), tells of all the attempts made by his wicked maternal uncle Kāṁsa, the king of Mathura, to destroy the babe, for it had been foretold that the eighth child of Kāṁsa's sister Devaki would slay this tyrant. Many fearsome demons, in various disguises, sent by Kāṁsa to destroy the infant met with their doom at his hands for he was none other than an incarnation of the great god Viṣṇu. Together with his brother Balarāma and the *gopas* (cowherd boys), he roamed the forest pastures, tending the cows, beloved by all despite his many pranks and performing miracles to save the inhabitants of Vraja from every threatened disaster (Pl. III). The five chapters dealing with Kṛishṇa's sports with the *gopīs* (milkmaids) in the flower-scented autumn woodlands of Vṛindāvana by the moonlit banks of the Yamunā are known as the *Rāsa-pañchādhyāyī* (Pls. V and VI). Here the *Purāṇa* attains true poetic beauty in its imagery of the now enraptured, the now sorrowful errant young women and the great dance where Kṛishṇa multiplied himself manifold so that each love-stricken maiden thought that she alone was dancing with the Lord of the Autumn Moons. The *Purāṇa* then tells of how Kṛishṇa went to Mathura where he destroyed Kāṁsa and put his maternal grandfather Ugrasena on the throne. It is here that the Gopāla-Kṛishṇa legend seems to unite with that of Vāsudeva-Kṛishṇa, the king of Dvaraka, who married the princess Rukmiṇi and became Arjuna's charioteer on the field of Kurukshetra in the great epic, the *Mahābhārata*.

No other element played so vital a role in the renaissance of Indian poetry and painting from the 15th to the 18th century A.D. as the cult of the cowherd god, and we find that the Kṛishṇa legend in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* was a favourite theme with the artists of the Rājasthānī and Pahārī schools of painting. Pahārī painting means the painting of the Hills, and is a term used to describe the schools which flourished in the Hill States of the Panjab and in Garhwal from the late 17th century to the 19th century. There are three stages in the development of Pahārī painting classified under three general headings which have become well established by usage. In each stage the style (*kalam*) undergoes a change.

(a) *The Basohli Kalam*: It is colourful and intense and seems to have been the norm in the Hills from about 1675 to 1740 A.D. It is called the Basohli *Kalam* as it is thought that it may have originated in the State of that name. But this is by no means certain. Nor is it certain how it originated, for it is a fully developed style when it makes its appearance though possessing a semblance of primitive vigour. No earlier style of painting nor any evidence thereof has yet been found in the Hills, though it may have existed.

(b) *The Pre-Kangra Kalam*: This shows the marked influence of 18th century Mughal painting due to the influx of some Mughal trained artists into the Hills after Nādir Shāh's sack of Delhi in 1739 A.D., and the subsequent Durrānī raids. Such political disasters led to migrations of artists, artisans, merchants etc., from the plains of Northern India to the greater security of the sheltered Hill States. This style



covers the period 1740 to about 1765 A.D. and is known as the "Pre-Kangra" phase because the famous Kangra style, which forms the third group, was directly developed from it. The "Pre-Kangra" phase brought a new outlook and a new technique to the art of painting in the Hills.

(c) *The Kangra Kalam*: The term is used to describe most of the work produced in the numerous ateliers of the Hill States from about 1765 to about 1850 A.D., and owes its derivation to the most powerful of the Hill States during this period, namely, Kangra, under Ghamānd Chand (1751-1774 A.D.) and then under his more famous son Sansār Chand (1775-1823 A.D.). The Kangra style itself has been subdivided into two groups:

1. The Standard style;
2. The *Bhāgavata* style.

The former derives its name from the stylized female face with curving eyes, flat appearance and straight nose in line with the forehead seen in the vast majority of Kangra style miniatures; while the latter derives its name from the more rounded female face possessing a porcelain-like delicacy and beauty, seen in a famous series of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* paintings, six of which are reproduced in this portfolio.

The date and provenance of this *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* series are still matters on which no certain conclusions can be arrived at. Originally the consensus of opinion was that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and other related sets were the creation of the atelier maintained by Sansār Chand of Kangra (1775-1823 A.D.), the paramount chief of the Hill States, and that they were painted between 1780 and 1800 A.D. This may still prove to be the correct viewpoint but more than one writer on the subject has felt the necessity of reconsidering the matter. Guler, Chamba and Kangra could all be centres where the *Bhāgavata* type of paintings were produced and a date as early as 1760-1765 A.D. has been proposed. But for the time being any date between 1765 and 1795 A.D. cannot be ruled out of consideration and hence this period, apart from providing a desirable margin of error, accommodates all the important viewpoints concerning the date of this series. One thing, however, is becoming more and more evident and that is, that much of the finest Pre-Kangra and Kangra style painting which has survived is the work of a famous family of artists whose pedigree is known and whose ancestor Pandit Seu appears to have migrated from one of the capital cities of Northern India to the Hills about 1740 A.D. His sons, grandsons and even great-grandsons worked in the ateliers of various Hill Rajas and probably also accepted commissions. There is little doubt that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and related sets are creations of the senior members of this family, no matter, whether they were produced in any particular court atelier or were commissions executed at their village home for their royal patrons. The names of the most famous artists of this family are Mānak and Nainsukh, the sons of Pandit Seu; Rām Lāl (also called Rāñjhā), Nikā and Gauhā, the sons of Nainsukh; and Kushan Lāl (also called Kaushalā), the son of Mānak. Kushan Lāl became the favourite painter of Sansār Chand of Kangra while Rām Lāl and Nikā and probably also Gauhā were court artists of Rāj Singh of Chamba (1764-1790 A.D.). Mānak almost certainly worked for Govardhan Chand of Guler, while Nainsukh was in the employ of Balvant Singh of Jammu.

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* series contained over a hundred miniatures when it was acquired by a Bombay dealer over three decades ago. But even so it was incomplete. Its find-spot was said to be Kashmir and it was stated that it was the work of one Chuniyā. There is no evidence to support either statement. The paintings were acquired by various collectors, the largest number being in the possession of the late Jugmohandas Mody of Bombay. The National Museum, New Delhi, acquired thirty-nine examples from Mody and they comprise the most representative group of this series today in any collection. It is evident that though such an extensive set must have been planned and controlled by a master artist from the family of Pandit Seu, not all the paintings are by his hand. Several artists have obviously worked on the series and that is why it is not uniform in quality. But the best miniatures therein are amongst the finest examples of the Kangra Style. One feature of the series is that the paintings depicting the *Rāsa-pañchādhyāyī* are all surrounded by blue borders with floral patterns in gold (Pl. V) while the remaining paintings have only plain blue borders (Pls. I and II). But even the *Rāsa-pañchādhyāyī* paintings are by at least two artists, who may aptly be called the masters of the moonlight scenes. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* paintings have become justly famous for their aesthetic appeal, their delicate, refined draughtsmanship and their exquisite colour tonality. Since the series deals with most of the episodes from Kṛishṇa's birth upto the death of Kāṃsa it covers a variety of themes which relieves it from any tendency to monotony. In this respect it was far more lively than stylistically related sets such as the *Gita Govinda* and *Sat Sai* of the Garhwal Darbar and the *Bārāmāsā* of the Lambagraon Darbar, etc., which are all well known to students of Pahārī painting.



## THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Pl. I. *The Exchange of Babes*. Bhārat Kalā Bhavan, Banaras.

It is a night scene. Vasudeva, who by the miraculous intervention of the gods has been freed of his fetters, takes the new-born babe of his wife Devakī to safety across the stormy Yamunā before Kāṁsa can destroy the infant who is none other than Kṛishṇa. He proceeds to the homestead of Nanda, the village headman of Gokul, whose wife Yaśodā has just given birth to a female child. Vasudeva places the blue-complexioned Kṛishṇa in her arms and removes the female child and returns with it to his prison abode. Kāṁsa does not know what has happened but has a premonition that the day of his doom is not distant. The stillness of the night over the sleeping village and the starry moonless sky are depicted with a masterly sense for subtle atmospheric effects. Vasudeva having exchanged the babes is seen leaving Nanda's homestead with the female child. The gentle Yaśodā, serenely sleeping on her cot, is unaware of what has taken place and rears Kṛishṇa as her own offspring. The scene has all the beauty of the birth of Christ in a manger by the early Flemish masters.

Pl. II. *The Butter Thief (Mākhan Chor)*. Collection of F. D. Wadia, Poona.

Kṛishṇa's baby pranks were the despair and also the joy of his foster-parents and the inhabitants of Gokul. Here he is seen accompanied by his brother Balarāma (always white-complexioned) and two village urchins as he steals butter from the churning pot, while Yaśodā, who appears again in the middle of the picture, rushes towards the fire-place where the milk has boiled over. This method of continuous narration is a frequent device in Indian miniature painting. Pl. II is an exquisite creation of the master artist of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

Pl. III. *Kṛishṇa swallowing the Forest Fire. (Dāvānala-Āchamana)*. National Museum, New Delhi.

Many were the miracles performed by the youthful Kṛishṇa to save the villagers of Vraja from the disasters that threatened them. Once a great forest fire broke out encircling the herds grazing amid the forest pastures. When all seemed lost, the *gopas* appealed to Kṛishṇa who opened his mouth and swallowed the raging flames having first told the *gopas* to close their eyes. In the painting the *gopas* are seen with their hands raised to their eyes at Kṛishṇa's bidding. Some of the cattle are seen gazing patiently at him for they know he will not let them perish. In the foreground flows the Yamunā.

Pl. IV. *Rādhā dancing before Kṛishṇa*. Collection of Seth Kasturbhai Lalbhai, Ahmedabad.

The vertical format is due to the fact that the miniature in its present condition is only the middle portion of a horizontal illustration in the series. Rādhā is not mentioned by name in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* but there is a reference to one *gopī* as Kṛishṇa's best beloved, who can be none other than the Rādhā of the legend. She is the very personification of elegance and loveliness as she dances before the blue cowherd god and his companions against a background of rolling grasslands.

Pl. V. *The Brides of the Autumn Moons searching for their Lord*. Collection of F. D. Wadia, Poona.

This is one of the illustrations to the *Rāsa-pañchādhyāyī*. It is surrounded by a blue border with a floral pattern in gold. One beautiful night when the autumn moon shed its silvery radiance over the banks of the Yamunā, Kṛishṇa decided to sport with the *gopīs* in fulfilment of a promise made to them. When the *gopīs* heard the strains of his flute their hearts were enslaved and forsaking their husbands and their homes they hastened to meet him. To tease them he chided them for their immodest behaviour. The *gopīs* were downcast and said:

"O Lord, it behoveth thee not to speak such cruel words to us."

Pleased with their devotion the Lord engaged in dalliance with them, whereupon each *gopī* became elated with pride. To humble their arrogance Kṛishṇa suddenly disappeared. Then the *gopīs* were sore distressed and searched for Kṛishṇa in vain. At last they discovered his footprints but they were mixed with those of his favourite *gopī* (Rādhā). In Pl. V the *gopīs* have traced Kṛishṇa's footprints and in the distance, unknown to them, Kṛishṇa is first seen with his favourite *gopī* plucking blossoms and then again stroking her loosened tresses. This miniature, by one of the masters of the moonlight scenes, is characteristic of the almost ethereal delicacy of treatment which marks all the *Rāsa-pañchādhyāyī* illustrations. Later, finding the *gopīs*



contrite, Kṛishṇa returned to them and then the great *Rāsa Līlā* began where the Lord created the illusion that he was dancing with each one of the *gopīs* as the circle of beautiful maidens went round and round on the silvery sands.

Pl. VI. *The Water Sports of Kṛishṇa and the Gopīs*. Bhārat Kalā Bhavan, Banaras.

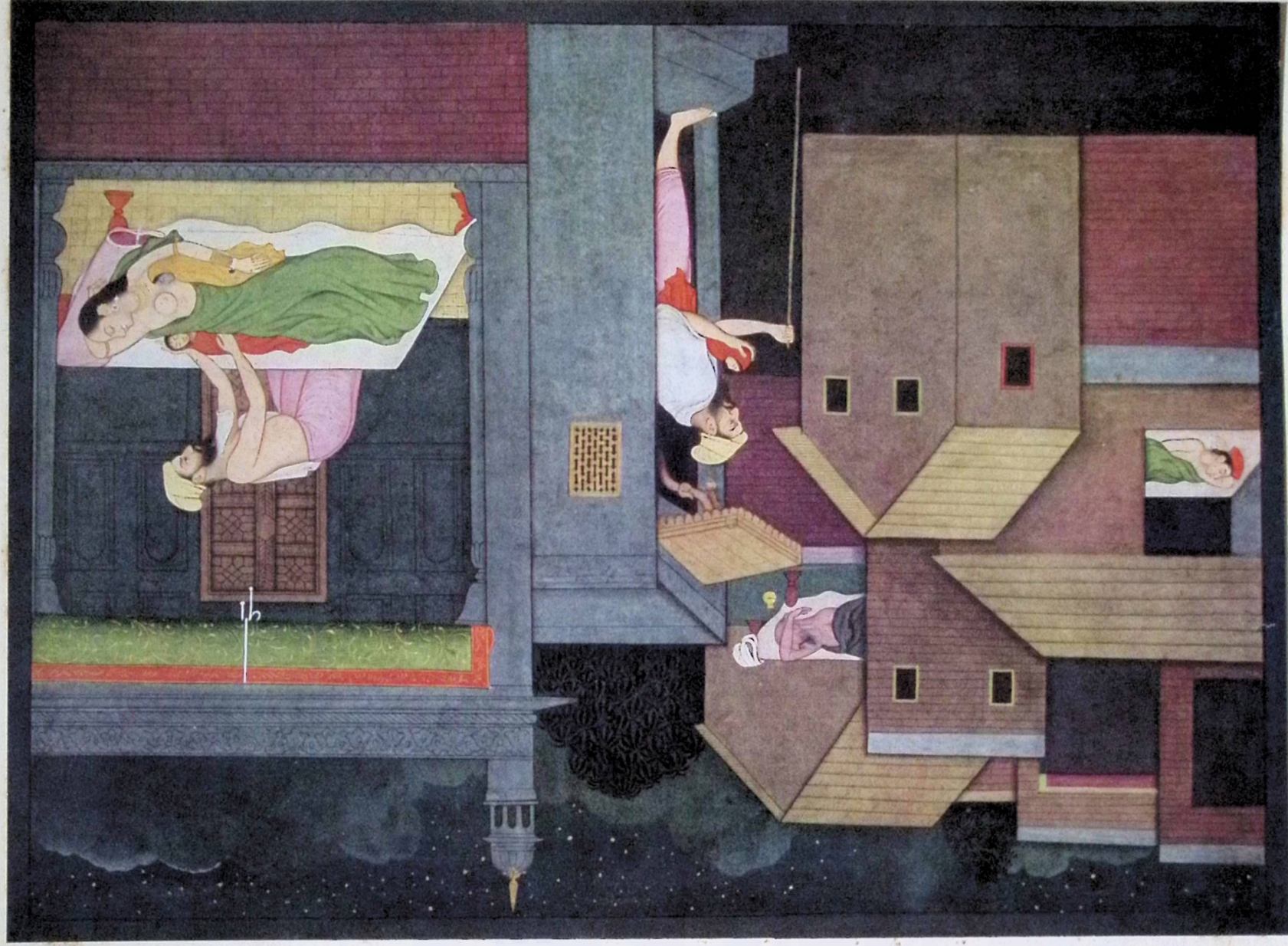
This is also an illustration to the *Rāsa-pañchādhyāyī*. When the great dance ended, Kṛishṇa and the maidens, to relieve their fatigue, entered the cool waters of the Yamunā and sported therein and made love. The blue border with floral decoration in gold has been omitted in the reproduction. Lines from the text of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* are to be found on the reverse of each of the paintings in this series. Such lines usually have reference to the subject matter of the painting.

Karl Khandalavala

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- W. G. Archer, *Kangra Painting* (Faber & Faber, London), where the original theory of date and provenance is discussed.  
Douglas Barrett and Basil Gray, *Indian Painting* (Skira), where a new date and provenance are suggested.  
Karl Khandalavala, *Pahari Miniature Painting* (New Book Co., Bombay), where the original theory of date and provenance is discussed.  
Karl Khandalavala, *Bulletin of the Baroda Museum*, No. XVI, where the original date and provenance are reconsidered.  
M. S. Randhawa, *The Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (National Museum, New Delhi), an album containing 20 colour plates from the series.









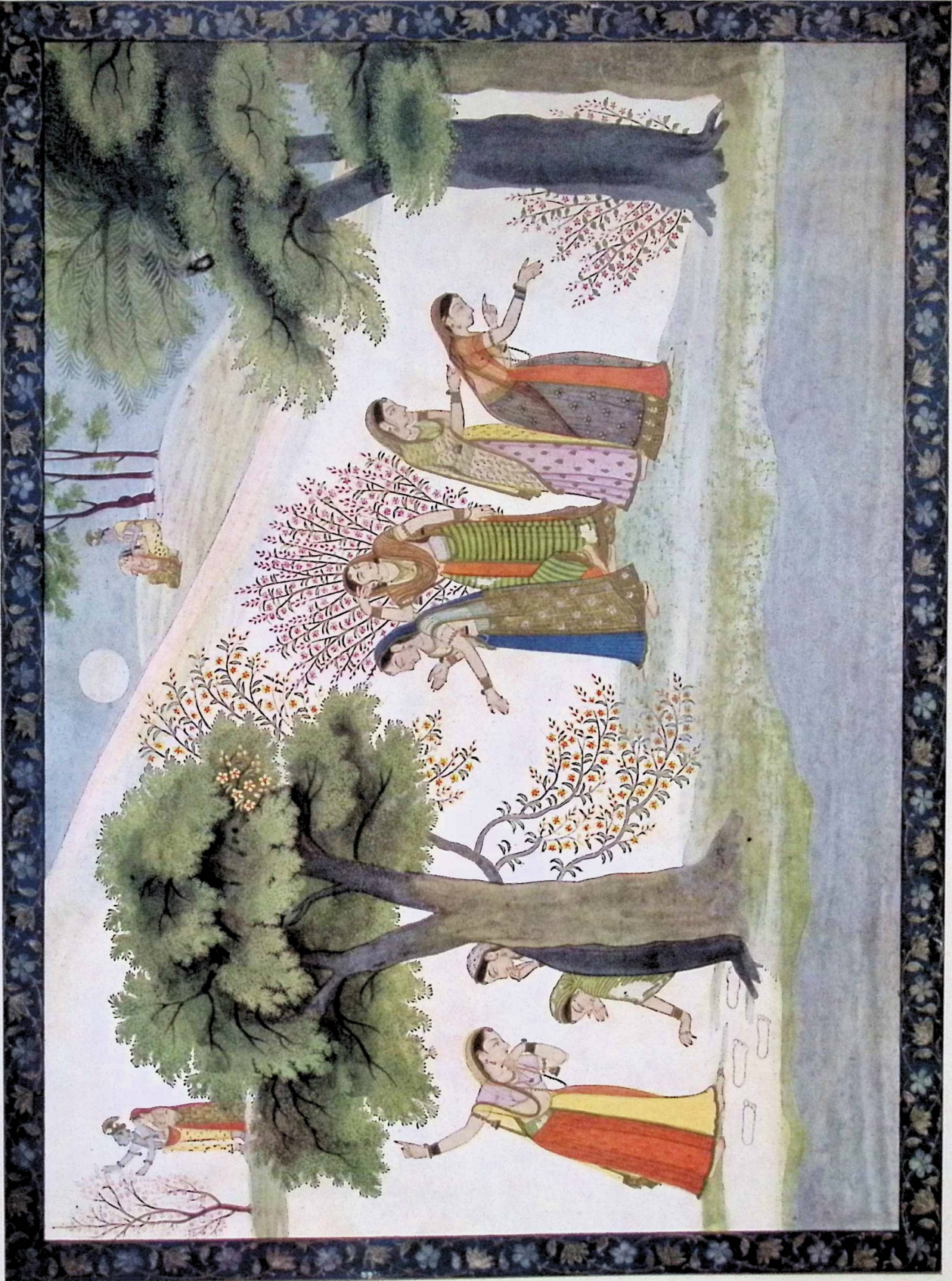


















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