

Mola Ram and Gharwal Minature Painting: An Appraisal

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Abstract

Mola Ram lived through the reigns of ten Garhwali kings. He states in his *Garh Rajvansh ka Itihas* that many of those rulers patronised him as a poet, but none as a painter neither any of them encouraged painting. For that reason that one finds very few Garhwali rulers depicted in the paintings and no miniature depicting a court scene is available. In one of such miniatures, ascribed to Mola Ram, Praduman Shah and his brother Parakram Shah are shown seated, but that appears to be a work of some novice rather than of an accomplished artist. Mukandi Lal had reproduced a miniature ~ *Ruler entertained by dancing-girl* ~ in one of his articles 'Garhwal School of Painting' 1948-1949 issue of the *RoopaLekha*. He identified the ruler, with the well-trimmed Muslim beard and outfit, in that painting as Lalit Shah. Archer ably refuted that identification on the logic that Lalit Shah supported long flowing beard, as may be affirmed from the inscribed painting of the king done by Mola Ram himself. Mola Ram has been popularly regarded to be the most accomplished painter of the Garhwal School of painting, but even Mola Ram's admirer, Jaykrit Shah regarded painting as a worthless effort as Mola Ram himself concedes in his *Garh Rajavansh ka Itihas*, wherein he claims '*chitrassa Inahak vanavo*'. The pertinent question is, did an independent school of painting develop in Garhwal, which the author has attempted in the

Mola Ram has been popularly regarded to be the most accomplished painter of the Garhwal School of painting. However, both these claims, that Mola Ram was an accomplished painter and an independent Garhwal School flourished, are the contentious propositions that call for proper probing. Though the period during which he lived is not precisely known, yet it is generally held that he had a long life. According to Rahul, he was born in CE 1740 and lived until 1833. Mukandi Lal originally fixed

his date of birth as CE 1760, but he later changed that to CE c.1743 hypothetically. Later, Archer suggested the date of his birth as CE c. 1750 on circumstantial evidences. However, there is no dispute on the date of death of Mola Ram in CE 1833. If at all Mola Ram had a long life, as Mukandi Lal suggests, the date C. CE 1740 (or 1743) should appear to be reasonably correct, because that makes him really live longer, for plus-ninety years. Around the time of the birth of Mola Ram, the atelier of the artists of the provincial Mughal School had long ceased to exist. That was certainly the state of affairs at the time, when Mola Ram grew up to start painting. Har Das, the last painter of the provincial Mughal School, had died about a century earlier and the conditions at Srinagar had become too volatile and disturbed for the painting to flourish during that gap. Therefore, art of painting was a matter of history as far as Srinagar-Garhwal was concerned, when Mola Ram was born in about 1740. Most of the professional painters had shifted to the Tarai area, where they could find jobs to embellish walls of houses of the wealthy people, *dharmshalas*, *gurudwaras*, temples, etc. Mola Ram had an inborn urge for art, especially for poetry and was an avid collector of paintings. He possessed a good collection of miniatures done by several painters of different schools, besides his own works "in similar style, all inscribed in Mola Ram's handwriting and notable for their harshness and crudity", notes W.G. Archer [1]. From the large collection of paintings of other artists in his collection, of which his own works formed only a fractional part, the personality of Mola Ram emerges out more as a collector and connoisseur rather than an artist. Having abandoned his parental vocation of goldsmith, he opted for poetry and painting. When did he start painting himself is not known, but it is certain that he had to leave his home at Srinagar to learn it at various centres. Some of his early paintings bear influences of the decadent Mughal style., That may suggest that in the beginning, he learnt painting either from the Mughal painters, who had migrated in the Tarai area from Srinagar or their successors. Later, he visited Kangra in about CE 1763 and possibly Guler [2]. Those places were at that time the flourishing centres of painting. At those centres, he not only learnt the delicate techniques of painting from the traditional Pahari masters, but also acquired miniatures from them for his collection. Mola Ram probably could not carry on well with Pradeep Shah (CE 1717-1772), the ruler of Garhwal. On the reverse of a painting, *Consoling the Queen*, he had inscribed four verses. One of those, dated *Samvat* 1826 (CE 1769), bitterly expresses his anguish over the treatment that was meted out to him in the royal court of Garhwal. His position in the court might have remained insignificant until Jaykrit Shah (CE 1780-1785) ascended the throne of Garhwal. He acknowledged his scholarship and artistic talent and accorded him a place of honour in his court. Jaykrit Shah even appointed him as his advisor in the political affairs. Mukandi Lal says, "Mola Ram and his ancestors received a *jagir* of sixty villages and a daily allowance of five rupees from the Rajas of Garhwal" [2]. Mukandi Lal may be corrected about his claim as far as Mola Ram is concerned, but it is certainly improbable that such endowment was available to his ancestors also, because none of the predecessors of Jaykrit Shah was the patron of art, particularly

painting. Even Mola Ram's admirer, Jaykrit Shah regarded painting as a worthless effort as Mola Ram himself concedes in his *Garh Rajavansh ka Itihas* when he says "chitrasal nahak vanavo. Chitrasal likhi tum kya pavo". Nevertheless, Mola Ram developed painting as his career, evolved a distinct style of his own by imbibing stylistic influences from various schools of paintings ~ provincial Mughal as well as the Western Pahari- and assimilated them into his own diction. At Srinagar, Mola Ram had an occasion to interact with the painters from Guler in present-day Kangra district and acquaint himself with some of the technical peculiarities of the miniature painting. It is alleged that the artists from Guler had come to Srinagar on the marriage of Praduman Shah (reigned in Garhwal from CE 1785 to 1804) with a daughter of one Ajab Singh of the ruling house of Guler in CE 1781. Understandably, the Garhwali prince also might have received some of the Guler miniatures as wedding gift on that occasion. However, the arrival of painters from Guler on that occasion may appear a bit intriguing. Because, neither Jaykrit Shah nor Praduman Shah was the lover of painting nor was that a royal wedding on the Guler side. How then the artists from Guler happened to be at Srinagar on the wedding occasion? The plausible answer to it may be that Mola Ram, placed at an important position in the feudal court of Garhwal under Jaykrit Shah, could have been instrumental in asking for the painters from Guler and other centres in Kangra on that occasion. That matrimonial alliance was indeed a very important event, because Mola Ram and other local painters, if any, could not only acquire refinement and delicacy in the use of line and colour, but also thematic versatility and complaisance from those painters. Garhwali painters, therefore, owe considerably to the western Pahari schools. HCE it not been so, the Garhwal painting could have ended up as a decadent offshoot of the provincial Mughal style [3]. Mola Ram made his mark in the feudal politics of Garhwal. He fully exploited his poetic and artistic talent to that end. At the request of Jaykrit Shah, he not only drafted a poetic petition addressed to Raja Jagat Prakash (CE 1773-1792) of Sirmaur, but also made a painting for the Sirmaur king. One of Mola Ram's assistants, named Dhani Ram, delivered that letter and a painting to the Raja.

The Raja of Sirmaur felt so delighted by the poetic letter and the painting that he sent out a force in support of Jaykrit Shah. Later, when Garhwal came under the Gurkha control, Mola Ram befriended Hastidal Shah Chauntariya, the Gurkha governor of Garhwal. He wrote the history of Garhwal ~ *Garh Rajavansh ka Itihas* ~ at his bidding. Hasti or Hastidal, figures in that work in various contexts. The significant benefit of that friendship was that Mola Ram could hold the *jagir* that Jaykrit Shah had granted to him for his role in the Garhwal politics even during the unsparing and oppressive Gurkha rule. Mola Ram lived through the reigns of ten Garhwali kings and he states in his *Garh Rajavansh ka Itihas* that many of those rulers patronised him as a poet, but none of them patronised him as a painter nor any of them encouraged painting. It may probably be for that reason that one finds very few Garhwali rulers depicted in the paintings and almost no

miniature depicting a court scene is available. In one of such miniatures, ascribed to Mola Ram, Praduman Shah and his brother Parakram Shah are shown seated. From the general treatment, it appears to be a work of some novice rather than of an accomplished artist. Mukandi Lal had reproduced a miniature - *Ruler entertained by dancing-girl* - in one of his articles 'Garhwal School of Painting' 1948-1949 issue of the *Roopa Lekha*. He identified the ruler, with the well-trimmed Muslim beard and outfit, in that painting as Lalit Shah. Archer ably refuted that identification on the logic that Lalit Shah supported long flowing beard, as may be affirmed from the inscribed painting of the king done by Mola Ram himself [4]. There is a valid reason for Lalit Shah to opt Sikh dress and appearance for political reasons. He wanted to appease his Sikh tormentors [5].

Mola Ram was witness to the collapse of dynastic rule, rise and fall of the tyrannical Gurkha hegemony and its fall under the British. However, he steered reasonably well through all those upheavals. He recorded all those events in his *Garh Rajvansh ka Itihas*. This work of Mola Ram covers the history of Garhwal from the period of Sham Shah (CE 1550-1569) to the tyrannical days under the Gurkhas and the British rule. Interestingly, Mola Ram has been rather restrained in criticising Gurkha rule, but very critical about the British occupation of Garhwal. The kingdom of Tehri-Garhwal came up in CE 1815 under Sudarshan Shah. Srinagar and the eastern part of the defunct kingdom of Garhwal came under direct British control. Mola Ram, then a dispirited old man of around seventy-five years of age, opted to stay at Srinagar possibly on health reasons and spent the rest of his life there. Probably, for his friendship with the Gurkha governor Hastidal, Mola Ram not only fell from the favour of Sudarshan Shah and the British overlords, but also lost his *jagir* and allowances that Jaykrit Shah had bestowed upon him. By way of pittance, the British authorities appointed one of his sons, Jwala Ram, as a clerk under the first British commissioner of Kumaon [3].

Successors of Mola Ram

Mola Ram had two sons, Jwala Ram (CE 1788-1848) and Shiv Ram (CE 1790-1855). Both of them adopted painting as their profession, but only Jwala Ram could make his mark as the last painter in the traditional style, which had already imbibed alien influences by that time. He painted a few pictures on the floral and faunal subjects, a few landscapes and some sketches of mythological themes. Shiv Ram took up his ancestral profession as a goldsmith, but also casually tried his hand in painting. Mukandi Lal has published a painting, depicting Sulaiman Shukoh from his collection [2]. M.S. Randhawa had also found some of Shiv Ram's paintings with the Raja of Nurpur [6]. Among the later successors of Mola Ram, only his grandsons Atma Ram, Hari Ram and Tulsi Ram produced the same works in a rather degenerated style. After them, painting ceased to exist in Garhwal. The reason responsible for the painting not to develop as

an organised school and for its end was the absence of patronage. With the collapse of feudal system that impulsively and casually appreciated painting, there was none to encourage it under the changed socio-political system. Therefore, the painters were obliged to abandon painting for more remunerative jobs. In case of Garhwal, another curious reason is also assigned. It is said that some of the successors of Mola Ram, who used to paint, became insane. Therefore, painting was alleged to be a curse. None, therefore, dared to learn it anymore and become mad. Nevertheless, the successors of Mola Ram conscientiously preserved the family art treasures until his great-grandsons, Tulsi Ram and Balak Ram, who sold them out to connoisseurs and art-dealers.

Efflorescence of the Guler Mannerism in Garhwal

Besides the names of the ancestors and successors of Mola Ram, no other important name of the painters of Garhwal is known. Nevertheless, a few other names are also known from the contemporary sources and works. Some of them were contemporary of Mola Ram and some others the later ones. We come across a name of one painter, named Manaku, the famous Guleri painter of the *Geet-Govind* fame, whom Mukandi Lal regards as a pupil of Mola Ram, which in fact should be the other way round. Mola Ram must have taken lessons in painting from that accomplished artist of Guler, but could not come anywhere near him. In CE 1920, N.C. Mehta examined the Kangra set of the *Geet-Govind* and a set of paintings on the *Bihari Sat Sai* (possibly by the same artist) in the ancestral royal collection of Tehri State at Narendra Nagar. Based on that discovery, the early scholars jumped to a pleasant and convenient conclusion that the finest of the Pahari paintings were produced not in Kangra region, but in Garhwal.

However, that myth was, soon exploded when the later researches established that those paintings, and many others, reached Garhwal as the dowry gifts. In CE 1829, Anirudh Chand (CE 1823-1831), the Katoch ruler of Kangra married his two sisters to Sudarshan Shah. Among other items, he also gave those sets of paintings to Sudarshan Shah. Chetu, a descendant of the Guleri artists' family of Pandit Seu, was another painter contemporary of Mola Ram, who happened to work at Garhwal. B. N. Goswami also tells about Jawahar and Saudagar, grandsons of Nikka, a Guler-Chamba painter, who worked at Tehri [7]. Circumstantial evidences do indicate that between Manaku (if at all he worked in Garhwal), who died in CE C. 1770, and Chetu (born in CE C. 1800), there certainly were some unknown painters of the Guler house working in Garhwal to the chagrin of Mola Ram. Who these immigrant painters could be, may not precisely be known, but some of them were better accomplished than Mola Ram. Despite his mediocrity as a painter, Mola Ram considered himself a great artist and rated his paintings highly. Under such conditions, when perhaps some better painters reached Garhwal about CE 1769 and 1775 during the regime of Medini Shah (CE 1664-1675), Mola Ram felt very disgusted and expressed his feeling in two of

his poems. Archer comments on the mindset of Mola Ram at that juncture as follows:

We do not know the exact circumstances in which these poems were written. But it is significant that both were written on pictures and bearing in mind Mola Ram's artistic pretensions, we can hardly doubt they are related, in some way, to his fate as painter. If outside artists had been welcomed in Garhwal in 1769, the shock to Mola Ram's self-esteem could well explain the first embittered outcry. He would naturally attribute their position not to merit but flattery, intrigues and lies. He would argue that their success was only transitory and that he, Mola Ram, would triumph in the end. He would hesitate to abandon his current style and hence in 1771, his first fully dated picture still shows only the prosaic dullness of a provincial Mughal manner. If, however, a little later, other artists received encouragement or the newcomers were now established not only would Mola Ram be stung to fresh bitterness but he would also realise that he must either desist from painting or adopt the new and fashionable technique. And this is precisely what appears to have occurred. In the poem to which it forms the headpiece is the first of a series in crude but obvious lines with the new Garhwal style. Such reactions point to only one conclusion—that certainly by CE 1775 and probably six to seven years earlier, the new school had come into being in Garhwal.

Archer. 1954.19.

Among the names of pupils of Mola Ram, Pritam Shah and Baqir Ali Fardaq are known. It is said that Baqir Ali Fardaq was not a local person, but had come to Srinagar to learn painting from Mola Ram. Mani Ram Vairagi is another person associated with Mola Ram, but it is doubtful that he learnt painting under him. Mani Ram Vairagi might have been an *udasi* inmate of the Guru Ram Rai *Durbar* at Dehradun, who himself was a painter in the *Durbar*. He is known to have come to Srinagar twice, in CE 1773 and CE 1818. In CE 1818, he visited Srinagar "to see with his own eyes the art of which he had heard so much". Pritam Shah was one of the four sons of Lalit Shah. He used to live at Gundiya Gaon from where he administered his *jagir* of Rawin. Mola Ram records in his *Garh Rajvansh ka Itihas* that Pritam Shah was interested to learn painting from him. However, he could not continue, for the distance that he had to cover between Gundiya Gaon and Srinagar. "I have been coming to my master's door at Srinagar so often that my legs are tired with coming and going. Still my master has not taught me all I wanted to learn," lamented Pritam Shah [5].

Whether Garhwal School: A Pertinent Question

Now, having briefly reviewed the course of development of painting in Garhwal centred on Mola Ram, the pertinent question is that if an independent school of painting could develop in Garhwal. Most of the predecessors of Mola Ram and he himself painted in the

degenerated Mughal style. While his predecessors were lost in obscurity, only Mola Ram stood out as a painter. In the beginning, the Kangra paintings on the *Geet-Govind* done by Manaku were regarded as the works of the Garhwal School. Moreover, many emigrant painters from the Guler house, having a distinct style of their own, were considered among the Garhwali artists. The fact that many accomplished painters of the Guler house happened to work at Garhwal briefly in their own ancestral style cannot make them the Garhwali painters or their works can be categorised under the Garhwal School. Nevertheless, the presence of those painters, and several other unknown ones, overwhelmingly influenced the mind and working style of the local painters, who had until then been painting in the decent Mughal style. From his visits to the centres of painting in Kangra, Guler and other places, Mola Ram had also acquired some degree of refinement in his style, which greatly improved his style and enriched his mental dossier with ideas and themes. Those factors helped him to evolve his personal diction in painting and to pass it on to his successors. How that individualistic style in painting can be generalised to designate it as the Garhwal School, is a very pertinent question.

None of the Garhwal rulers was a lover of painting, but many of them patronised poets, which fact is repeatedly admitted by Mola Ram himself, as already noted. The sets of miniatures on the *Geet-Govind* and the *Bihari Sat Sai* that Raja Manvendra Shah had in his collection were not by the local Garhwali artist, but by an 'alien' of the Guler house, and none of them was painted in Srinagar. How then those paintings could be regarded as the products of the Garhwal School? Further, had the Garhwal rulers been the patrons of painters, at least some miniatures of Mola Ram, projected to be the most accomplished painter of the so-called Garhwal School, should have been in the royal collection. What intrigues further is the revelation that Mola Ram was himself a collector of paintings of the other artists, besides his own. To collect paintings of the other artists is understandable, but why should he collect his own works? An artist and his art may survive without patronage only as a hobby, and that is how Mola Ram adopted it. This fact is amply corroborated from the inscription on one of his paintings, named *Mastani*. It records ... *Kavi Mola Ram musavir bainthi raha tasvir rijhane men*, that is, the poet Mola Ram painter is engaged in painting to amuse himself [2]. That may explain why he shined to be called as a painter, but as a poet. His predecessors and successors were casual painters. They earned their livelihood not by painting, but by other vocations, as noted earlier. Interestingly, most of the works of that family, including of Mola Ram, were found nowhere, but with Balak Ram, the great-grandson of Mola Ram, as a family heirloom. How then the works of an individual painter, who painted only for self-satisfaction, having a considerable stylistic variety, suggesting different stages of experimentation, can represent a well-defined regional school, when “the collective style of the state” as expressed in a local school of painting has of necessity remained the prime basis for classification (Archer, 1973). The so-called ‘Garhwal School’, if it is to be called as a 'school', was essentially a 'Mola Ram School', that could hardly reach maturity, because, perhaps

the 'poet' in Mola Ram never allowed that to be.

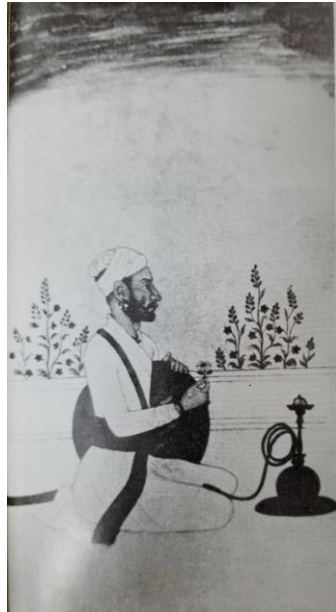


Fig. 1: Portrait of Garhwal Molaram



Fig. 2: Raja Pradhyumana Shah of Garhwal seated with his younger brother

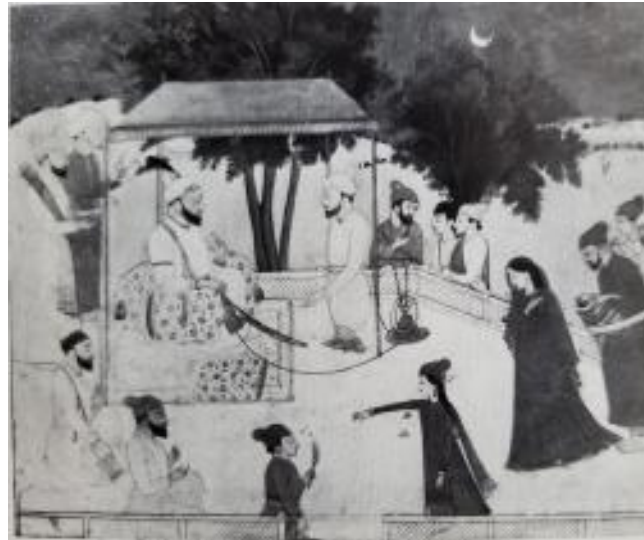


Fig. 3: Ruler entertained by dancing girls, Gharwal, 1775

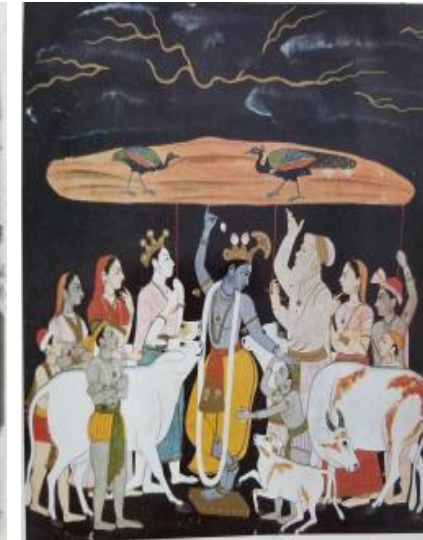


Fig. 4: Goverdhan Dharan Garhwal

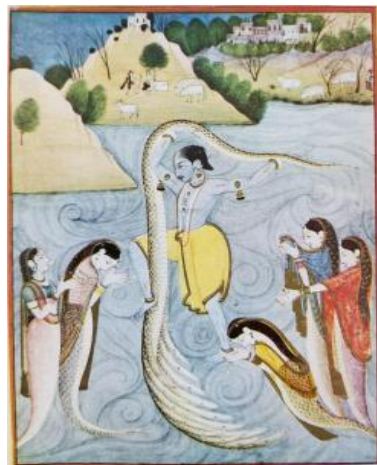


Fig. 5: Kaliya Daman Garhwal



Fig. 6: Krishna in Amorous



Fig. 8: Temptation of Parvati

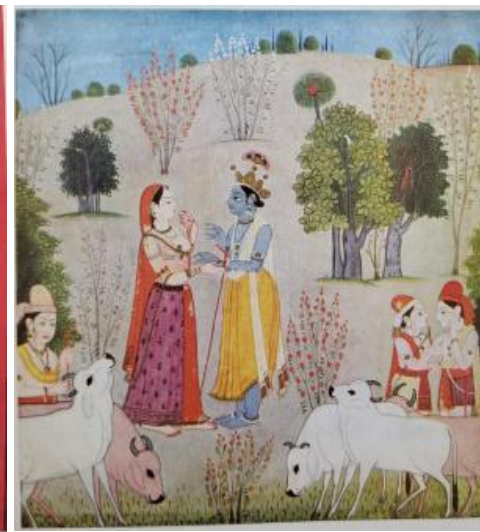


Fig. 7: Radha Krishna in Garden



Fig. 9: Rukmani Waiting for Krishna

It may not be possible to isolate precisely the characterising features of the so-called Garhwal School, which essentially was a one-man school (of Mola Ram) or, liberally speaking, an one-family school, which throughout represented a conglomerate of the decadent Mughal, the western Pahari and the European styles. Nevertheless, scholars have attempted to identify some characterising features of this school. According to Mukandi Lal, "The horizontal, curved *chandan tika* (sandal-paste mark) on the forehead of women of high status is peculiar to paintings of the Garhwal School" J. C. French finds Garhwal School strongly influenced by the Kangra Valley, but feels that "in the flow of line and the general atmosphere there is a certain difference [8]. In fact, the lines in the Garhwal paintings (excluding the ones made by the painters of the western Pahari schools) lack fluency. Those tend to be stiff and the overall effect of colours lack freshness and vigour. Although the colours in Mola Ram's paintings have a sort of wishy-washy effect, yet the use of dark and warm colours - strong blues, dark greens, reds and blacks - is so heavy that a feeling of heaviness

pervades all over. The figural treatment tends to be bulky and the faces round. The nose appears to be more pointed with the flat-looking forehead, with the faces shown in profile. The treatment of landscape is generally stark and simplistic with the monochromatic flat sweep to describe curvaceous profiles of the hills. These hills compare nowhere near to the pointed and stately Nar and Narayan Peaks or other mountainous features around Srinagar, which the scholars have striven to identify in the miniatures of the Garhwal painters, especially of Mola Ram. The depiction of leafless branches, with the spikes of pinkish exuberance of the *mandar*, blooms in the foreground, and the globular dark green trees on the horizon are some of the characterising features of Garhwal paintings.

In the treatment of curling clouds and swirling and gushing waters in the streams, the painters have relied upon the heavier linear formula that robs the lightness of these elements. Mola Ram and all the painter-members of his family had never been full-time painters. They had not only been experimenting in various styles in painting, but also working in different mediums like wood, metals, etc. for their living. Mola Ram's successors had no idea of the traditional mineral colours and used crude and coarse bazaar colours in their paintings, which were "inferior in both technique and drawing" [2]. Under these factors, the Garhwal School could never take off and reach a level of reasonable maturity. It rose and developed with Mola Ram and declined with his death.

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