

RUMAL SHOWING LIFE SCENES OF LORD KRISHNA

Design interpretation

Off-white cotton rectangular *muslin rumal* (coverlet) is divided into four rectangular divisions, with a narrow floral creeper border, each division depicts scenes from Lord Krishna's life and all four divisions are surmounted by the broad floral creeper. The *rumal* is made in serial mode with a narrative sequence that begins with the time just before the birth of Krishna and culminates with his killing of the great enemy, his uncle, Kansa.

This is one of the spectacular examples of storytelling through embroidery. According to Hindu pantheon, in the Hindu trinity, Lord Vishnu is the preserver, the guardian of life. When sins multiply, Vishnu reincarnates himself to rid the earth of its calamities. Krishna is regarded as the eighth incarnation of Vishnu, and the legends relating to him are found in the Bhagvata Purana and its Hindi version, Prema Sagara (Randhawa, 1982).

The *rumal* seeks inspiration from the story of Krishna's birth, childhood, and youth narrated at great length and with much passion in Bhagvata Puran. The main characters seen in this *rumal* are Krishna, his parents and foster parents, his brother Balrama, his cowherd friends, king Kansa, Kansa's father Ugarsena, demons, etc.

The narrative begins with the birth of Krishna. Krishna belonged to the Yadava tribe, a pastoral people who lived in Vrindavana and Gokul (towns in Uttar Pradesh, India) on both sides of the river Yamuna. His parents, Devaki and Vasudeva were imprisoned by Kansa, the ruler of Mathura, for it had been prophesied that their child would kill him. Six of their children had already been killed by this evil king, and the seventh, Balrama, was miraculously transferred to the womb of Rohini, Vasudeva's second wife. The eighth child of Devaki was Krishna, who was also saved by his father by exchanging him with a daughter born to Yashoda, wife of Nanda, who lived in Gokul, across the Yamuna. It was with Nanda that Rohini and Balarama had already taken shelter (Randhawa, 1982).

The birth of Krishna ushered in an era of prosperity for Vraja, but Kansa had strange forebodings and felt no peace (Randhawa, 1982). Demons were sent by him to kill the divine

child, but all to no avail. The embroidery beautifully captures the killing of these demons by Krishna. The narrative then eventually shows the killing of Kansa by Krishna, other preparatory events, and finally releasing his parents from the prison and reinstalling of his grandfather as king of Mathura in the final climax.

If we read the portrayed events correctly, the following sequence is seen in four divisions:

First division:

The first division depicts four scenes, two relating to the beginning of the story and two telling the climax of the story. The division shows the birth of Lord Krishna and in the end, Krishna reinstalls his grandfather Ugarsena to the throne of Mathura after killing Kansa. It has been worked in two registers (horizontally) which show two scenes in each register. These scenes show divinities, human figures adorned with traditional costumes of *Pahari* region, architecture, a throne, weapons, and animals.

1. Birth of Krishna
2. Exchange of babies
3. Krishna meets his parents after killing Kansa
4. Krishna reinstalls Ugrasena, his grandfather as king of Mathura.

Second division:

This division depicts five scenes in two registers, three on the upper and two in the lower registers. Here he is killing demons like Putana, Sakatasura, and Bakasura, some episodes from his early childhood years. These scenes show human figures adorned with traditional costumes of *Pahari* region, architecture, and a variety of local musical instruments of the region.

1. Yashoda receives Krishna.
2. Killing of demoness Putana
3. Killing of Sakatasura
4. Krishna's birth celebration
5. Killing of demon Bakasura

Third division:

Below the second division is the third one (left to right), which shows the six activities of Lord Krishna, three scenes in each register (upper and lower). It shows Krishna's killing of various demons in his later childhood years, which came in the form of animals such as a bull, horse, elephant, python, etc.

1. Killing of demon bull Arishtasura
2. Killing of demon horse Keshi
3. Krishna killing elephant Kuvalayapida.
4. Krishna is tied to the mortar.
5. Killing of demon python Aghasura
6. Krishna playing with brother and *gopas*.





Fourth division:

Fourth and the last division of *rumal* show seven scenes of Krishna's life, where he and his brother went to Mathura and killed Kansa and other demons, which have been arranged in three registers. The scene shows the festivity, the killing of a demon, a musical instrument, a throne, colourful courtly costumes.






1. Krishna and Balarama meet the dyer.
2. Two wrestlers.
3. Krishna killing Kansa.
4. Krishna and the hunchback.
5. Krishna killed the Chanur.
6. Balarama killing Sunama.
7. Krishna killing Kuvalayapida







It is clear from the embroidery that the artist who drew in the *rumal* does not adhere faithfully to the sequence of the episodes as given in religious texts but makes modifications by adapting the narrative as per the space and requirements of a different medium i.e. the fabric.








Explanation of Scenes in Division 1

S.NO	SCENE	HEADING	DESCRIPTION
1.1		Birth of Krishna	Devaki and Vasudeva were in prison, where they were blessed by the four-armed Lord Vishnu, who visited them in prison before the birth of Krishna. Soon after, Vishnu incarnated himself in form of Krishna and assured Devaki and Vasudeva that their ordeal would end soon. Both Vasudeva and Devaki feared that Kansa would kill him, so here they prayed to Krishna to hide his divine appearance. Pair of guards with swords and shields along with watchdogs are guarding the prison. The imprisoned couple is seated on a striped mat. Vasudeva is wearing a striped ankle-length coat (<i>jama</i>) tied with a sash at the waist and a turban with a band. And mother Devaki is seen wearing a blouse (<i>choli</i>), skirt with variegated bands (<i>ghagra</i>), and <i>dupatta</i> overhead. Usually, Krishna is a blue-bodied god but here he is shown in red, wearing striped loin cloth (<i>dhoti</i>) tied with a sash at the waist. He is holding <i>sankha</i> , <i>chakra</i> , <i>gada</i> , and lotus in his four arms. He is wearing his crown (<i>mor-mukata</i>) with three petal-shaped points projecting vertically from a circlet surmounted with peacock feathers.
1.2		Exchange of babies	Here, Vasudeva is taking his newborn glorious son from Mathura with divine assistance to Nanda and Yashoda in Gokul in exchange for babies to save his son from Kansa's wrath. Yashoda had given birth to a girl child Yogmaya. In his front, there is a tiger, a representation of goddess Durga and a serpent Sesha saves the baby from rain by spreading his hood over the baby Krishna's head. A very interesting observation is seen where Vasudeva has tucked up his <i>jama</i> into his waist, appropriate to the act of moving with swiftness. He is wearing tight-fitted trousers (<i>pajamas</i>). A similar costume is seen in the Devi Kothi temple mural narrative (more details in discussion).
1.3		Krishna meets his parents after killing Kansa	In this scene, young Krishna had come to meet his parents Devaki and Vasudeva to release them from prison after killing Kansa. Krishna is touching the feet of his father Vasudeva, who is blessing him with his hand forward and Devaki is standing with folded hands. Vasudeva is wearing a striped ankle-length <i>jama</i> tied with a sash at the waist and a turban. And his mother Devaki is seen wearing a blouse (<i>choli</i>), skirt with variegated vertical bands (<i>ghagra</i>), and <i>dupatta</i> overhead. Krishna is wearing shorts and his conical cap. A similar painting is in the collection of Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba from Laharu's Bhagvata collection depicts the same scene.
1.4		Krishna reinstalls Ugrasena, his grandfather as king of Mathura	In this scene, Ugrasena is seated on the throne in <i>Anjali mudra</i> (folded hands) and Balrama (pink body) anointing him on the forehead and Krishna (blue body) is shown holding a bowl in his hand (Goswamy and Fischer, 2009). Ugrasena is shown in a courtly dress in a striped <i>jama</i> down almost up to the ankle and tied at the waist by a sash (<i>patka</i>) and a turban with a band. Krishna and Balrama are shown wearing a pair of shorts (<i>janghia</i>) with a sash tied around the waist. The upper part of the body is bare. There is a scarf (<i>dupatta</i>) thrown over the shoulders. The headgear of the Krishna and Balrama consists of a conical pointed cap (<i>kula</i>) around which is tied a decorated sash (<i>pechi</i>) with loose ends. The peak of the cap is surmounted with peacock feathers (Bhattacharya, 1968). A four-legged throne with a seat and bolster is also shown.

Explanation of Scenes in Division 2

S.NO	SCENE	HEADING	DESCRIPTION
2.1		Yashoda receives Krishna	This is in continuation to the previous scene 1.2, where Vasudeva has set out to Gokul to exchange babies to Nanda's home where his wife has given birth to a girl child. Here in the inner chamber of Nanda's home, Yashoda is lying on the bed, and Vasudeva is taking the baby girl back to the Mathura leaving Krishna with Yashoda. He is also shown coming out of the chamber with the baby and heading in the same direction from where he is coming in the previous section in 1.2. Interestingly here also he is wearing a tucked <i>jama</i> like in section 1.2 but in a different colour. A fabric is tied on the head of Yashoda as it is a notion that post-delivery the woman must cover her head to safeguard her from cold. The bed shown indicates the affluent landlord's home whereas in the previous section the couple is seated on a mat in prison.
2.2		Killing of demoness Putana	The next scene is Putana <i>vadh</i> , (killing of demoness Putna), she was sent by Kansa to kill Krishna. The demoness Putana offers to feed the baby at her breast smeared with poison. The Putana is lying senseless on the floor and baby Krishna is standing on her. Her long thin tongue dangles out due to pain. Krishna had sucked her breast so intensively that it ripped off her breast and she died in pain. Here Krishna is shown pink-bodied and naked with a chain around his neck and waist. The demoness is shown in a striped blouse, skirt, and scarf.
2.3		Killing of Sakatasura	The last scene of this register show baby Krishna, in blue, pulling the cart, which is a Sakatasura demon, who came in the form of a cart carrying heavy vessels. The demon was sent by Kansa to kill baby Krishna. Here, Krishna pulls the cart, destroys it, and vessels fell from the cart onto the ground. The Krishna is shown as blue-bodied wearing striped shorts, a conical cap, and a scarf on the shoulder.
2.4		Krishna's birth celebration	This scene shows the celebration of the birth of Krishna in Nanda's household. Nanda, father of Krishna sits on the striped rug (<i>durrie</i>) and gives gifts (<i>dhan</i>) to the priests (<i>brahmins</i>) accompanied by a guard holding spear and shield. The ambiance is a festival where three persons are playing musical instruments; two are playing trumpet instruments (<i>kahal</i>) and clarinet (<i>shehnai</i>) and one fellow is playing kettle drums (<i>nagara</i>).
2.5		Killing of demon crane Bakasura	Bakasura- <i>vadh</i> , the killing of the demon in Bakasura is the last scene. Demon Bakasura in the form of a giant crane was sent by Kansa to swallow Krishna. Here Krishna caught hold of him by the two halves of the bill and tore him apart. Krishna is shown in pink body colour.

Explanation of Scenes in Division 3			
S.N O	SCENE	HEADING	DESCRIPTION
3.1		Killing of demon bull Arishtasura	To kill Krishna, Kansa once sent a demon named 'Arishtasura' (which means bull demon in Sanskrit). The demon, Arishtasura transformed himself into a bull and went in search of Krishna towards Vrindavan. Arishtasura started creating havoc by uprooting trees, destroying houses, and scaring away villagers. Krishna caught one of his horns, swirled him vigorously in the air, threw him on the ground, and broke his horn. The bull fell with a loud thud and was killed by Krishna. Source: https://www.tell-a-tale.com/krishna-killed-demon-arishtasura/
3.2		Killing of demon horse Keshi	In the centre, the killing of the demon Keshi by Krishna has been illustrated. Kansa sends the demon Keshi, in the form of a magnificent horse to kill Krishna. Keshi entered Vrindavan with great speed, his mane flying, his hooves digging up the earth started making a horrifying sound and terrifying the inhabitants of Vrindavan. The Krishna threw Keshi a hundred yards away, who became unconscious. After a while, Keshi regain consciousness, and went towards Krishna with great anger and forced Krishna to open his mouth. The Lord pushed his left arm within the mouth of Keshi, which has been shown by the embroiderer here. The Keshi felt like a hot iron rod inside the mouth and experienced great pain. Immediately his teeth fell out. Then Krishna inflated his arm within Keshi's mouth, choking him to death. (https://www.iskconbangalore.org/little-krishna/krishna-kills-keshi/)
3.3		Krishna killing demon elephant Kuvapida	The sequence of this scene belongs to the fourth division, a similar scene is shown in the fourth division again. The moment Kansa heard the news of Krishna and Balrama's arrival, he ordered to unchain the mad elephant Kuvapida in Krishna's way. Krishna broke its trunk by giving a heavy blow and the elephant died of pain. Here Krishna is shown breaking his tusk.
3.4		Krishna is tied to the mortar	Often Krishna's childhood naughty activities use to make his mother Yasoda angry. Once out of anger she tied Krishna with a rope to the mortar inside the courtyard of their home. In the courtyard, there were two Arjuna trees. After a while, inside the courtyard, Krishna managed to crawl between the trees along with the mortar, to which he was tied. He gave a jerk uprooting the trees and out of the tree, emerged Nalakubera and Manigriva, sons of Kubera. These sons were cursed by the sage Narad on account of their pride having been transformed into trees. Both got the relief of the curse and came into human form. The Krishna is seen in a pink body wearing shorts (Randhava, 1960)
3.5		Killing of demon python Aghasura	The Bhagvata Puran states that a demon Aghasura assumed the form of an enormous serpent to kill Krishna. The demon assumed the gigantic body of a boa constrictor, stout like a big mountain, motionless, and his tongue like a broad road. Krishna's companions, the cowherd boys, entered its mouth, mistaking it for a mountain cavern. After seeing this, Krishna then came to their rescue, entered his mouth and killed demon Aghasura, and saved his friends, cows, etc. The boys and the cattle are reappearing through the wounds or an opening in the belly of the monster. The monster's body is shown spotted while Krishna and Balrama are in their usual costumes.
3.6		Krishna playing with brother and gopas	Krishna with his brother Balarama holds the stick and plays with cowherd boys (gopas). Krishna is in blue, while his brother is in maroon

Explanation of Scenes in Division 4			
S.NO	SCENE	HEADING	DESCRIPTION
4.1		Krishna and Balarama meet the dyer	The scene seems to be based on Padma Purana, which says, on the invitation of Kansa, Krishna and his brother Balarama visited Mathura. On the way to the palace, they meet a dyer with colourful apparel. Krishna demanded clothes, which the dyer refused to give and behaved badly with them, Krishna had a fight with him and he died. Here it seems that dyer is sitting with his things and his hand's gesture of 'no' perhaps is the refusal of Krishna-Balarama's requests for attire.
4.2		Two wrestlers	Here, two wrestlers' i.e. Chanur and Mushtika are shown. The body of one of the wrestlers is shown as massive in off-white colour and the other wrestler is shown in dark pink colour. Krishna killed Chanur and Balarama killed Mushtika in a wrestling event. In the lower register, the wrestler in the pink body is shown fighting with Krishna in the wrestling match.
4.3		Krishna killing Kansa	King of Mathura Kansa is sitting on the throne when Krishna entered his palace. Krishna grasps king Kansa from the tuft of hair, places his foot on Kansa's knee, and delivers a blow to his head with the broken elephant tusk of Kunalayapida. Kansa is wearing a striped <i>jama</i> tied at the waist whereas Krishna is shown in pink colour in shorts tied at the waist, scarf, and conical cap.
4.4		Krishna and the hunchback	A story of a woman born with a hunchback is reminded while looking at this scene in the <i>rumal</i> . The story is, when Krishna and Balarama strolled through the streets of Mathura, they encountered a hunchback woman laden with all sorts of precious sandalwood paste and oils. He request the paste, which she gave and by Krishna's boom, she recovered from the deformity. Here in the coverlet, Balarama is shown with a pot and Krishna is walking toward him to receive it.
4.5		Krishna killing the Chanur	As per Bhagvata Puran Kansa arranged a wrestling match and invited Krishna and Balarama. Kansa sends his wrestler Chanur and Mushtika to wrestle with Krishna and Balarama. After the wrestling had gone on for some time, Krishna overpowered the wrestler Chanur and killed him. Cowherd boys (<i>gopas</i>) are celebrating in joy for their victorious friends. They are adorned in ankle-length <i>jamias</i> , <i>patkas</i> , and turbans. While Chanur is in striped shorts and Krishna is shown in pink colour wearing shorts, a scarf, and a conical cap (Randhava, 1960).
4.6		Balarama killing Sunama	Balarama in maroon is shown killing Kansa's younger brother Sunama in the same style as Krishna killed Kansa.
4.7		Krishna killing Kunalayapida	As per Bhagvata Puran Kansa ordered his caretaker of an elephant (<i>mahavata</i>) to stand at the main entrance of the palace along with the furious elephant Kunalayapida to stop Krishna and Balarama. The maddened elephant rushed forward, Krishna leaped into the air placing one foot on his head, uprooted one of his tusks, and struck him in the face with it. This tusk was then used by him to kill Kansa. A drummer playing <i>nagara</i> and two musicians are playing <i>kahal</i> and <i>shehani</i> , perhaps they are playing as the news of the death of Kansa spread.

Discussion:

Such stories are also popularly seen in other mediums of art in *the Pahari* region such as *Pahari* miniature paintings and murals. Laharu's Bhagvata miniature painting series, in Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, is well known and the Devi Kothi temple in Chaurah in Chamba district, Himachal Pradesh east mural depicts Krishna's life cycle. The Laharu was a well-known 'carpenter- painter' responsible for an extensive series of paintings in Chamba who was active from 1735 CE, died in 1767 CE (Goswamy and Fischer 2009). The Laharu paintings from Chamba School are dated 1758 CE whereas Devi Kothi temple was erected in 1754 CE by Raja Umed Singh, Chamba. This indicates that Krishna's life events and deeds were famous subjects that were popularly made and influenced embroidery too.

Some scenes in the *rumal* are made very close to these narratives on walls and paintings.

For example some similarities with mural is seen in a scene, where Vasudev is holding a baby in hand while traveling from Mathura to Vrindavan. He is seen wearing a tucked coat (*jama*) while crossing the river in the Devi Kothi wall painting (figure 1). Similarly in the embroidery, in the same sequence, the same tucked costume can be seen (figure 2). According to the authors, the marching retainers and courtiers although wearing long trousers but similarly tuck their *jam*s-coats while traveling for ease in walking (Fischer, etal, 2003). Also the costumes worn by Krishna and his cow herd companions are identical in these mediums. According to an author, the attire of the Krishna and his cow herd companions usually consists of a pair of shorts (*janghia*) with a decorated sash (*patka*) tied round the waist. The ends of the *patka* hang loose in front. The upper part of the body is bare. There is a scarf (*dupatta*) thrown over the shoulders (Khandalavala, 1958). These costumes could be evidently seen in mural and in embroidery.

Some similarities in the scenes portrayed in miniature paintings with the *rumal* are the birth of Krishna in prison, and the slaying of demons like Aghasur and Bakasur *vadh*, releasing parents from prison. In the review, it is mentioned that Laharu the painter of miniature paintings of Bahgavata Puran series was fond of making long striped rugs in paintings (Goswamy and Fischer 2009). Here in the embroidery of *rumal*, the furnishings are made similarly. Even the musicians along with their instruments are similar in these mediums.

Similar themes were also studied in other chamba *rumals*. They are discussed below:

1. Like the fourth division of this *rumal*, based on the killing of Kansa, similar *rumal*, accession no. 929, is in the collection of Calico Museum, Ahmedabad.
2. In another big size *rumal* from the same museum with accession no. 3703, illustrated the Ramayana and Bhagavata Puran series along with the wedding of Radha and Krishna as a central theme. It is interesting to note that the drawings of narratives in both the *rumals* are very similar in their depiction such as scenes like the birth of Krishna, the exchange of babies (figure 7), the slaying of demons like Putana and Bakasura, etc.
3. The other two *rumals* are in the collection of the Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba. The one which illustrated the scene of the exchange of babies is published in the book 'The Temple of Devi Kothi, by Eberhard Fischer, V.C. Ohri, and Vijay Sharma (pg. 147, pl-169a). The second one with accession no. 69.8, showed many other episodes from Bhagavata Puran. The scene of killing of Aghasura is common in both the *rumals* (figure 8). The drawing of python is same in mural, miniature painting and embroidery. However, the textures in giant serpent skin are quite similar to those seen in embroidery.

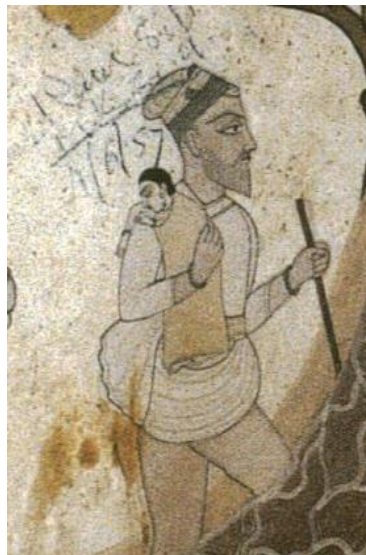


Figure 1 Vasudeva holding baby wearing tucked *jama* while crossing river in Devi Kothi mural



Figure 2 Vasudeva holding baby wearing tucked *jama* in *rumal*.



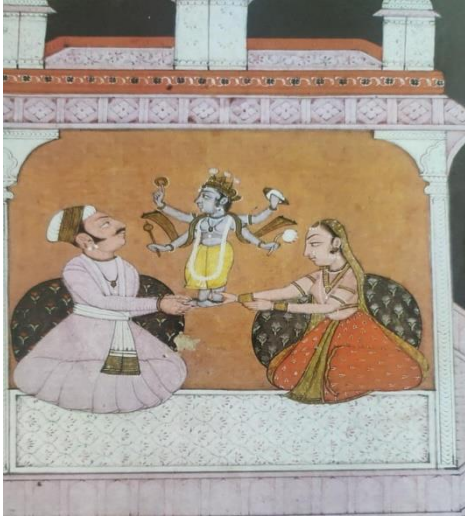
Figure 3 A band of musicians, Devi Kothi Murals, Chamba



Figure 4 A band of musicians in *rumal* showing *kahal*, *shehnai* and *nagara* as in mural



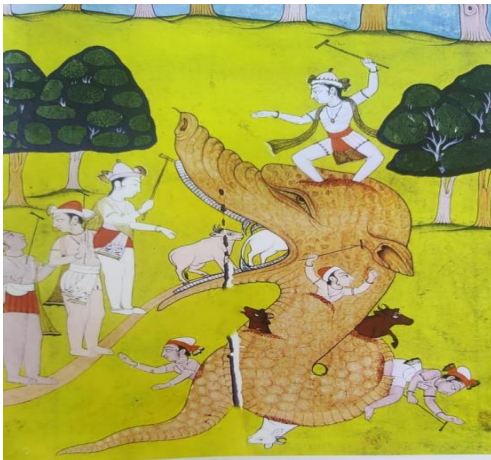
Figure 5 East wall mural of Devi Kothi temple showing Krishna life events.



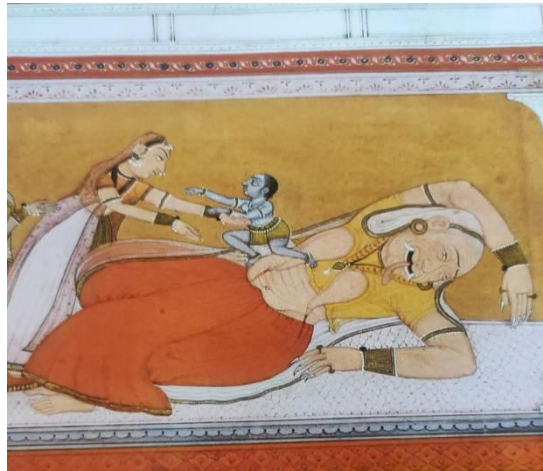
Birth of Krishna



Exchange of babies



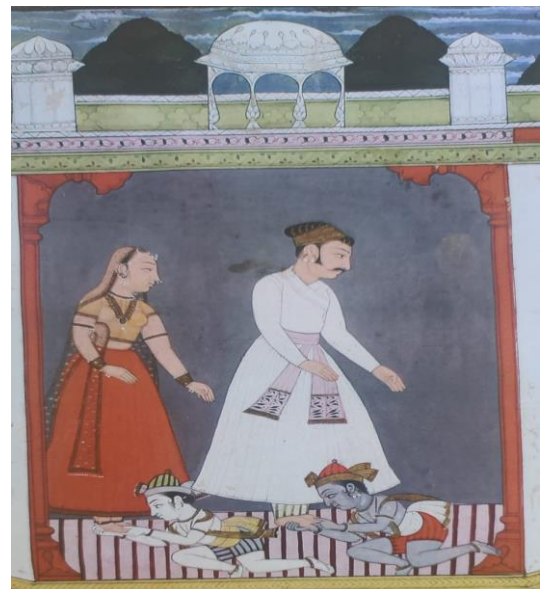
Krishna kills Aghasura.



Krishna kills Putana.



Krishna kills Bakasura.



Krishna and Balaram releasing their parents from prison.

Figure 6 Some paintings from Laharu's Bhagavat series, Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba



Figure 7 Detail of Chamba *rumal* from Calico Museum, Ahmedabad, accession no. 3703 showing two scenes; birth of Krishna in prison and Vasudev taking Krishna to Gokul



Figure 8 Detail of Chamba *rumal* from Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, showing scene of killing of Aghasura by Krishna

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9. Source:<https://web.archive.org/web/20060626031357/http://vedabase.net/sb/10/12/en>)