

A Historical Preview of Basholi - As witnessed by Silent Ruins

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From the times immemorial Jammu province was divided into small petty states, Lakhanpur, Jasrota, Billawar, Ramnagar, Chinani, Baderwah, Kashtwar, Kirmachi, Akhnoor, Poonch and Basohili were the independent states of Jammu province. These independent states had to give the part of their revenue to the rulers of Delhi and Punjab. The rulers of these petty states constructed forts, palaces and temples in their domains.

From the historical point of view, Basholi ever held an important place among these autonomous petty states. Town of Basholi is situated on the northeast and is about 130 kms from Jammu proper. Basholi is famous for its distinctive Basholi School of paintings, which is known world wide owing to their peculiar style of paintings. Basholi paintings have carved a separate place in the field of art. Masterpieces of Basholi paintings are not only found in India but also in the museums abroad. Dogra Art Museum, Jammu is having a good collection of Basholi paintings.

Pal rulers of Basholi were patrons of art. During their regime Basholi paintings added new dimensions to the pahari art by blending so many novel elements and out of this add mixture evolved a peculiar and distinctive style of painting.

So many famous artists and painters hailing from different quarters of the country adorned the royal durbar of Basholi rulers. These artists received lot of patronage and encouragement by the Basholi rulers, which is indicative of their fine taste for art. Consequently these artists embellished the palace walls with their art. Basholi palace paintings were worth seeing once. RangMahal of Basholi Palace has been popular theme of discussion in the artistic circles of the country as well as abroad. Much has been written on the buildings and palaces of Basholi. Many visitors from the country and abroad visited this place. Their travel accounts facilitated our imagination in building conjectural picture of the past glory and grandeur of Basholi. Now only ruins are left to tell the story of the glorious past of Basholi.

In 1835, G.T. Vinage, visited this place. He saw there the beautiful palace and buildings. He was fascinated to see the palace buildings. From his travel report it is clear that up to 1835, the palace building was intact and in good condition.

Few years' back Govt. started a painting school at Basholi, now the school is closed. While this was a welcome step, towards, keeping the traditions of art alive in this region. But the local people didn't cooperated regarding this matter.

Basholi paintings have a peculiar style. The colours used are also different. Some people have tried to relate it with the Kangra School of paintings. In my view Basholi region evolved a new and individual style of its own. In this style there may be some similarities with other schools as far as theme and content are concerned but the overall style is peculiar and distinctive.

Old forts and ruined palaces are still standing the ravages of time at Basholi. These ruins bear witness to the Basholi past and speak a lot about the culture and traditions of the past. In the past Basholi was sometimes independent and sometimes under the rule of Jammu. During the Mughal regime Basholi had to pay a part of its revenue to the Delhi Durbar and afterwards, the reins were taken over by the rising power of Sikhs.

In the building activity at Basholi, Mughal architecture is clearly evident. Among the ruins at Basholi are the palace and the fort. On the southern side of the palace is a fort and on the northern side is a temple. Ruins of the fort are on top of a hillock and the Devi temple is situated on the top of the hill.

The palace has three sections-Durbar Hall, Sheesh Mahal and Rang Mahal. Raja Amrit Pal started construction of this palace and the construction work was completed in the reign of Raja Mahendra Pal. Now the palace is in ruins having a deserted look. Not only weathering and time factor played its role in deterioration but the vandalism of local people also contributed a lot in razing to the ground this marvelous palace building.

Plinth and the ground floor of this palace building are in stone. The first floor is made up of burnt bricks. Presently it is very difficult to locate the Rang Mahal and Shesh Mahal. Now what are left are the heaps of bricks and stones. There is a basement also which is still in good condition. On some standing walls, paintings are still seen. On the brick wall a layer of lime plaster was applied and after a coat of fresh lime, painting was done. Paintings on these ruined palace walls still look fresh as if painted yesterday.

The palace building didn't collapse due to weathering and time factor but was raised to the ground by local people and the Government also didn't take any interest in these falling ruins. Now the Archaeological survey of India is looking after it. The palace of Basholi was a fabulous construction in the whole hilly area but Alas! destructive hands of man couldn't find any other target.

On the western side of the palace is a tank, which remains filled with water throughout the year. Temple, which is on the hill, is a modern construction. This Devi temple was constructed by repairing the earlier temple. This temple was repaired during the Dogra regime.

While proceeding towards River Ravi there is an ancient Shiva temple. The precise date of its construction is yet to be established. Besides Shiva linga there are a cluster of many other deities represented around the linga viz. Nandi, Bhairava, Hanuman and Ganesha. The roof of this temple is in terrace form. Adjacent to this very temple there is also a small temple of Shiva's consort Parvati.

In Basholi, on the bank of River Ravi are two caves. These caves are carved out from a huge rock the big cave is having two rooms. The outer room is square and the height of the ceiling is seven and a half feet. From the ceiling is hanging a bell. Room is having three niches; niche on the western side of the cave room is bigger than the other two Southern sides of the cave room leads to another room. On the left side of the entrance is a life size image. This image is of the founder of Basholi, Raja Vishva Rana. The image is in higher relief but the sculptor is not able to give it a realistic look. King is wearing a turban and round his waist is attached a sword. Second cave room is as small one; the ceiling of this room is also very low and is of dome shaped. In the center of the room is a Shiva lingam. Presently the whole area is submerged under water.

In my opinion the history of this cave dates back to centuries. Work of carving out this cave, appears to be that of skilled chisellers and to complete it must have taken years. Blue waters of River Ravi, the, lavishly green nearby hills and the snow clapped mountains in the backdrop make the environs suitable for meditation and spiritual study.

Outside the cave is a big boulder. On the eastern side of the boulder is a niche having the height of one meter. Inside the niche is the Shiva linga. On the backside of the niche are the relief images of Shiva and Parvati. On one side of the niche is a three-headed image of Shiva. Outside, on the top of the niche, is a carved image of Ganesha, on the left side of the niche is Nandi and on the right side is Hanuman. Some of the images are defaced beyond recognition. From the iconography point of view the work is not up to the mark and it also does not show the excellence in chiseling work, but still the work is appreciable. About one and a half kilometers from Basholi is a small hamlet of Mahadera. There also is an ancient Shiva temple.

Old monuments are integral part of our cultural heritage, which has survived down the ages. These should be maintained and conserved at all costs for the posterity. These ruins are not merely heaps of stone boulders but they are the only witness of our past. We have to protect them and keep them alive. This is not an easy job but not even impossible all together.