

# Towards a New Naturalism

## Portraiture in Murshidabad and Avadh, 1750–80

J.P. Losty

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Despite the reputation for academic dryness of mid-18th-century Mughal painting, some artists could come up with interesting solutions to technical problems, for example Govardhan and Muhammad Faqirullah Khan, who were both concerned with the exploration of light, space, and volume. Nonetheless, most Mughal work of this period is divorced from the naturalism of both figural and landscape depictions, and the ease with which the former were set within the latter, which had characterized the finest Mughal work of the 17th century. Figures were now little more than cut-outs, viewed horizontally, stiffly disposed within schematic, geometrically devised landscapes or other spatial frameworks, which were viewed from on high. To remedy what had begun to appear deficiencies, Mughal artists, apparently of their own accord (for this was at a period before any political or commercial advantage in copying European works), again called upon European art to help them to impart volume to their figures and spatial depth to their compositions; but what was of particular interest to these artists was the means to unite the disparate viewpoints which the withdrawal from naturalism had most obviously revealed. We will chart the beginnings of these developments, which took place entirely outside the moribund Delhi studios, in the Murshidabad court studio, and

follow them as they spread westwards to Patna and Avadh.

### EARLY MURSHIDABAD PAINTINGS

A court portrait of about 1750–55, of Navab 'Alivardi Khan of Bengal (1740–56) and his relations on a terrace (figure 1) raises the various issues which concerned artists at the time. It is drawn with considerable feeling for naturalistic perspective. The lines of bolster and floor-spread will eventually converge, although not on the horizon provided by this artist, while the navab is firmly placed on his portable throne and is not floating in front of it. The artist has also happily placed the figure of the navab to the left of centre, so that the traditional three-quarter view of the body appears naturalistically observed, as is his head in profile, which seems positioned for eye contact with his nephew facing him. This kind of arrangement for the principal figure of a painting is not new, for it is found in paintings since at least the early 18th century. Nor may we suppose that the artist actually sketched the navab seated in this position; rather he cleverly used a pre-existing *charba* (tracing) to suggest naturalistic observation. Likewise the other figures on the terrace, also taken from *charbas*, are carefully placed in relation to the central figure to suggest a naturalistic grouping, especially the three



1  
Navab 'Alivardi Khan  
(r. 1740–56) with two  
nephews and his  
grandson.  
Murshidabad, 1750–55.  
38 x 27.5 cm.  
V & A Museum,  
London, D.1201-1903.  
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and Albert Museum.

figures behind the navab. This kind of concern for using stereotyped formulae and groupings with an eye to naturalistic effects appears to be a burgeoning concern in late Mughal painting from Murshidabad. Artists were helped in this sort of provincial court portrait by the absence of the emperor, before whom no one could sit: his presence created almost impossible spatial difficulties for artists concerned to depict recession while attempting to balance, as required in any Mughal court painting, the formal requirements of two and three dimensions simultaneously.

The three kneeling figures have been identified by Skelton (1956) with the navab's two nephews Shahamat Jang and Saulat Jang and his young grandson Siraj al-Daula, who succeeded

him in 1756. The subject of the painting is the presentation of a *sarpech* (turban ornament) by the navab to his nephew Saulat Jang facing him. He is thus shown on the same plane as the navab but drawn on a slightly smaller scale. The grandson, however, and heir apparent, if placed in a similar position to the other nephew, and thus balancing the composition symmetrically, would to an Indian eye obviously be in a subordinate position to his uncle, being lower down the page when viewed only in two dimensions; so the artist has compromised by placing him on the same plane as the navab and Saulat Jang, thereby impinging on the latter's space.

The background of this painting with its different perspective viewpoints seems at odds

2  
Navab 'Alivardi Khan  
out hunting.  
Murshidabad, c. 1750.  
24.8 x 32.7 cm.  
V & A Museum,  
London, D.1199-1903.  
Reproduced by  
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Victoria and Albert  
Museum.



with the attempted naturalism of the foreground. Despite the concern of some artists to depict spatial depth, their difficulty was that they naturally drew figures from a horizontal viewpoint and disposed them in space without concern for the high overhead viewpoint from which the picture subject is meant to be observed. A brilliant solution to this problem is to be seen in one of the finest paintings from the Murshidabad school, where the overall viewpoint has been lowered to coincide with the viewpoint of the foreground figures. The painting shows 'Alivardi Khan out hunting' (figure 2). The mounted navab is dramatically poised to leap from the bank of a river into the water after his dogs in hot pursuit of a fleeing gazelle. The fully worked out landscape is observed not from the traditional high viewpoint of Mughal painting, but from a naturalistic viewpoint at the eye-level of the onlooker, i.e., the normal European one. The river dominates the landscape and recedes between high bluffs crowned by pines towards a distant Italian type of town and the horizon. As the picture recedes, the colour tones, dull greens, blue, beige, and brown in the foreground, lighten to an almost pure white at the horizon. Here is clear influence from a new European source, landscapes of the mid-18th century, displaying the principle of the transition from dark to light from foreground to background which was developed in the 18th-century theory of the picturesque.

The figures in themselves could have been taken from any standard Mughal hunting scene, although the attendants are livelier than most, but have been beautifully fitted into this "Westernized" landscape. Thus the navab is larger than the attendant figures, as we would expect in any Indian painting, but the two on the right have been perfectly positioned on the far side of the river, so that their smallness is

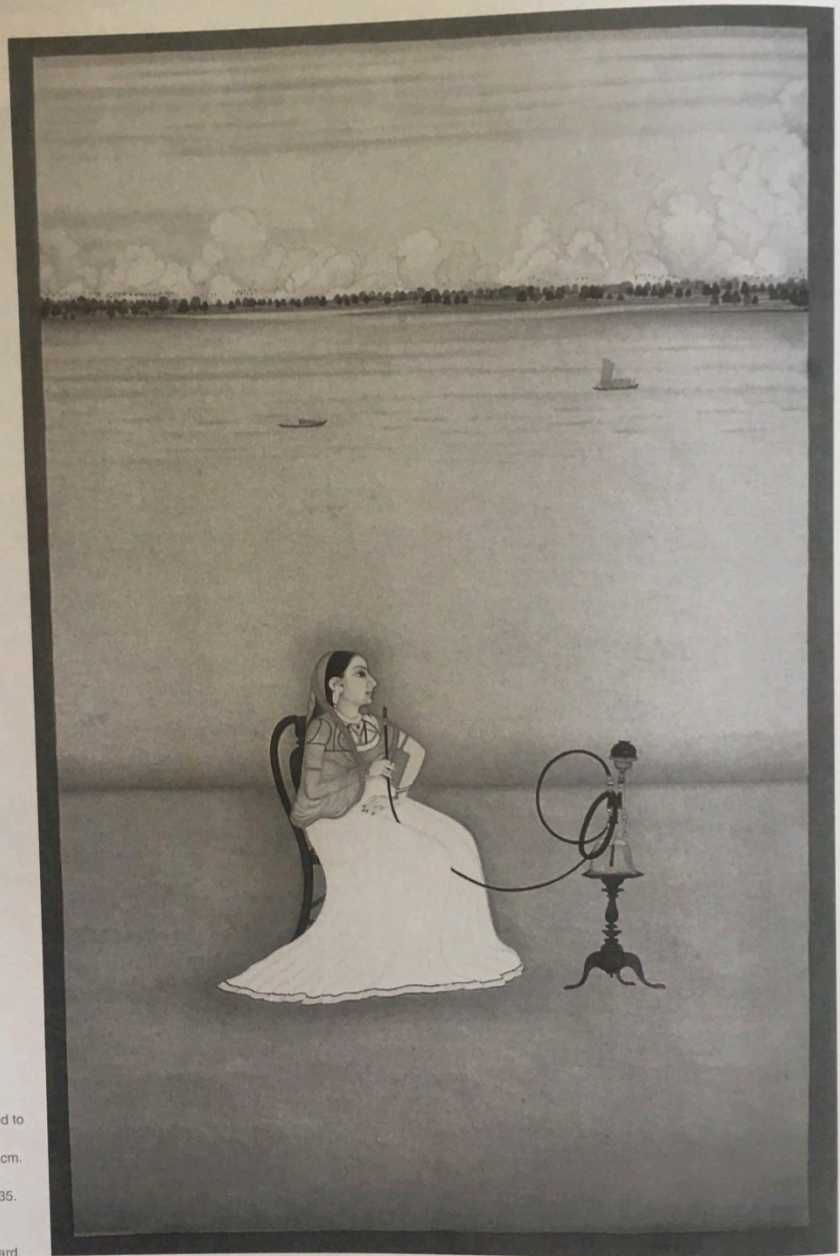
accounted for also by their being much further away from the viewer, which this viewpoint is able to suggest. The attendant on this side of the river is larger than those on the other, while the dogs he is tending are much larger than those in the river, so that the eye anticipates a steep drop to the river for the navab's horse, a drop suggested also by the shadow which runs along the bank. There are still some spatial difficulties – the horse is heading back into the picture's space, whereas the navab in strict profile is heading across the picture plane – but it is remarkable how well European ideas on composition have been assimilated to produce a still thoroughly satisfying Indian work of art.

This hunting scene stands near the beginning of the development of the Murshidabad school, and an artist of genius is here striking out an independent course. We may merely note at this stage that he has introduced a naturalistic landscape behind a portrait. In contrast, other types of Murshidabad paintings such as *Ragamala* sets keep to the traditional landscape format with high viewpoints and interlocking triangles of often almost geometrical severity, or more fantastic shapes to suggest mountains.

#### THE WORK OF DIP CHAND

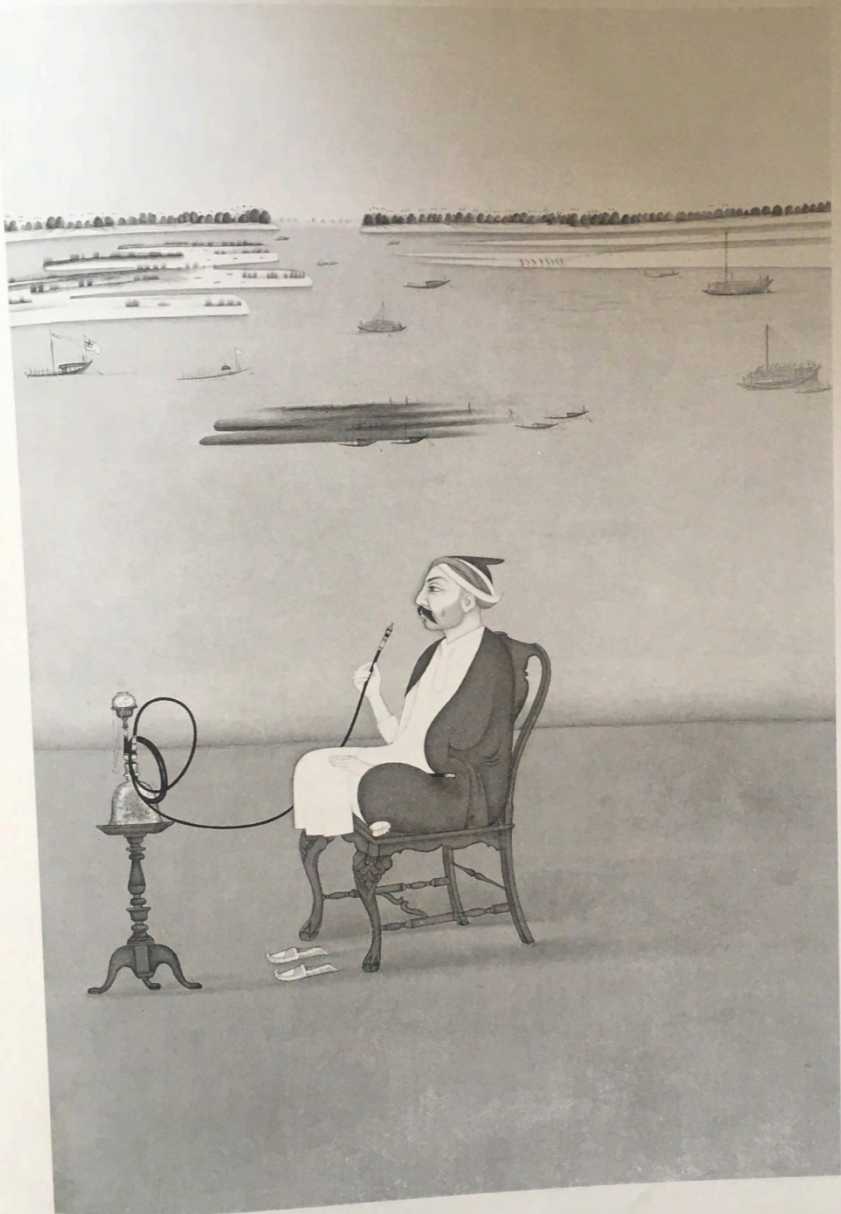
The Murshidabad artist Dip Chand, whose surviving work was all done at Patna, seems to have acted as an intermediary in the transmission of varying Mughal styles in eastern India. Trained originally at Murshidabad, he seems to have gone with Navab Mir Qasim 'Ali Khan to Patna in 1763. Mir Qasim, who had been placed on the throne of Bengal in 1760 by the British in Calcutta when they deposed his father-in-law Mir Jafar, was not prepared to be a client ruler, and on his being in turn deposed in 1763, launched a war against the British. In Patna, Dip Chand also worked for the East India





4

A lady called  
Muttubby, attributed to  
Dip Chand. Patna,  
1764. 20.9 x 13.1 cm.  
British Library,  
London, Add.Or.735.  
Reproduced by  
permission of the  
British Library Board.



5  
Ashraf 'Ali Khan,  
attributed to Dip  
Chand, Patna, 1764.  
22 x 14.9 cm, British  
Library, London,  
Add Or.736.  
Reproduced by  
permission of the  
British Library Board.



6  
Trees on the farther  
side of the Ganga.  
Detail of figure 4.  
Reproduced by  
permission of the  
British Library Board.

7  
(facing page)  
Mir Qasim 'Ali Khan,  
Navab of Bengal,  
attributed here to Dip  
Chand, c. 1763–64.  
34.7 x 24.7 cm.  
Museum für  
Islamische Kunst,  
Berlin, Polier Album,  
I.4596, fol. 1r.  
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Preussischer  
Kulturbesitz.

he followed his master Mir Qasim to exile in Avadh. A painting which seems intermediate between Murshidabad and Avadh styles is an unsigned portrait of Mir Qasim (figure 7), which must be dated before 1764, when the navab passed into exile and penury in Avadh. The richly coloured portrait shows the navab seated in state on a terrace, with two attendants holding *morchbals* behind him. The figures and foreground are rendered in the court Murshidabad style – note here the complete absence of lighting effects and shadows. In contrast to the foreground, recession is admirably suggested in the landscape background by the use of colour toning and by diminishing the sizes of the trees as they recede to the horizon, from which rises a group of lightly toned hills. Each

tree is provided with its own minuscule shadow. This seems to represent a development from Dip Chand's landscape background behind Muttubby's portrait (figure 6), before this type of landscape dotted with small trees was taken up by the Avadh artist Mihr Chand, with whose work it is particularly linked. The landscape here and the proud carriage of the two attendants in particular allow us to link this painting to Dip Chand, whose known signed work in a rather loose style is all for a comparatively impecunious European; here perhaps is an example of his court style in his miniaturist technique. Maybe this was a last defiant fling by the dispossessed Mir Qasim at establishing his status before he was stripped of his belongings by Navab Shuja' al-Daula in 1764.<sup>1</sup>





### AN EARLY MIHR CHAND PORTRAIT

The painting styles of the Mughal court at Avadh are dominated by two gifted experimental artists, Mihr Chand son of Ganga Ram, and Mir

Kalan Khan. Mihr Chand's signed portrait, apparently his earliest surviving one, of Emperor Shah 'Alam (r. 1759–1806, figure 8) of the 1760s is still very much in the imperial style. Emperor



8  
The Mughal emperor  
Shah 'Alam, by Mihr  
Chand. Allahabad,  
c.1765. 24.7 x 18.1  
cm. Museum für  
Islamische Kunst,  
Berlin, Polier Album,  
I.4594, fol. 32r.  
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and throne are observed spatially from a point level with the emperor's head: thus we can see down into the throne platform, as we could into 'Alivardi Khan's throne. The carpet on the terrace, however, is viewed vertically from above. This mixture strongly suggests that Mihr Chand was trained in the Mughal imperial style and perhaps left Delhi in 1758 when his master fled to the east. At first moving around between Patna and Varanasi, Shah 'Alam settled in Allahabad in 1764 after the decisive defeat of the imperial forces at Buxar. Mihr Chand's portrait shows a man still in the prime of life, certainly no more than forty, so that the likeness must have been taken by 1768 at the latest. A departure from the imperial portrait style, however, is Mihr Chand's concern here with lighting: light from the left defines the form of the parasol for example, and casts shadows

behind and beneath the throne. We have seen these effects in the work of Dip Chand in Patna in 1764, and we surmise that when their respective masters met in Allahabad and Varanasi in 1763-64, so did these two artists.

#### LANDSCAPES IN AVADH PAINTING

The landscape background to the portrait of Navab 'Alivardi Khan hunting (figure 2) is not an isolated phenomenon. There are many other later 18th-century paintings which show a renewed interest in European landscape, but this time not the distant landscape of Flemish miniatures but a bolder one of lakes and hills with abbeys, churches, and villages in the foreground, based on 18th-century European prints. Landscape studies from the Western eye-level viewpoint, such as that from Murshidabad circa 1750 (figure 9), based no doubt on an



9  
Landscape study.  
Murshidabad, c. 1750.  
12.7 x 15 cm.  
British Library,  
London, Johnson  
Album 62, no. 1.  
Reproduced by  
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British Library Board.

Italian model, shows a whitewashed village on a bluff overlooking a river, which recedes round the bend into a rocky ravine, while the foreground is dominated by an arching pine tree. The composition here is very close to that in the

landscape behind the hunting 'Alivardi Khan (figure 2). Such European landscapes may be seen decorating John Wombwell's room in figure 16. It is possible that such studies were brought to Avadh in the train of Navab Qasim 'Ali in



10  
The Emperor  
Farrukhsiyar.  
Mughal, c. 1720, with  
landscape added in  
Avadh, c. 1770.  
31.5 x 25 cm.  
Museum für  
Islamische Kunst,  
Berlin, Polier Album,  
I.4596, fol. 30r.  
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Kulturbesitz.

tends not to employ them again, reverting to more traditional Indian landscapes. One of many such examples from Avadh is found in an equestrian portrait of Emperor Farrukhsiyar (r. 1713–19, figure 10) of about 1720, which has had such a landscape added in an Avadh studio about 1770. A receding landscape takes over from the old simple one, incorporating lakes, one with a castle sitting in it, and a village with a great abbey church on the hill above. Other hills form the horizon. The theatricality of the sky has been greatly increased also, with rolling grey clouds tinged with gold and more vivid streaking in red.

In traditional Mughal portrait studies, the subject exists in space through standing on a strip of ground with sky and cloud touched in behind. Whereas groups of figure studies in the 17th and early 18th centuries do often have developed landscapes in the appropriate Mughal manner of the time, such backgrounds are rarely seen in pure portraits. Portraits could not be made too realistic for fear of offending the orthodox. Aurangzeb had banned painting at court precisely because during his father's reign paintings had become increasingly true to life. Later Mughal artists, exposed as they were to various types of European art circulating in India in the mid-18th century, were again pushing forward the frontiers of naturalism in their paintings. They adopted the new type of European landscape as a means of making their naturalistically painted portrait figures exist in real space. These new landscapes and the figures set in them were now viewed from the same naturalistic eye-level viewpoint, adding to their sense of realism.

#### MIHR CHAND AND BAHADUR SINGH

The best, or better, artists such as Mihr Chand, Bahadur Singh, and Mir Kalan Khan



carry this concern with total naturalism over into all their work, and suggest perhaps their belief in the reality of the people and events which they depict through their characteristically individualized and contrasting landscape styles. Mihr Chand's style is particularly associated with a naturalistically viewed flat landscape dotted with small trees receding to distant hills, the distance suggested in aerial perspective by changes in tonality. We have mentioned already that he may have taken the idea from Dip Chand. Mihr Chand uses such a landscape whether behind a portrait or behind an imaginative scene, such as his unfinished study, circa 1770, of the Hindu legend of the *Gajendramoksha* (figure 11), in which Vishnu rescues an elephant trapped by a crocodile.

11  
*Gajendramoksha*, by  
 Mihr Chand.  
 Faizabad, c. 1770.  
 19.5 x 14.3 cm.  
 British Library,  
 London, Johnson  
 Album 40, no. 1.  
 Reproduced by  
 permission of the  
 British Library Board.



12  
Portrait of a mufti in a  
landscape, by  
Bahadur Singh.  
Faizabad, c. 1770.  
21.2 x 13.5 cm.  
British Library,  
London, Johnson  
Album 1, no. 20.  
Reproduced by  
permission of the  
British Library Board.

Mihr Chand was not the only Avadh artist to adopt this type of naturalistic landscape, for it is also found in the work of his contemporary Bahadur Singh, as in his fine portrait of a mufti (figure 12) standing in front of a seemingly limitless landscape dotted with small trees. The immediacy of Bahadur Singh's portrait is enhanced by the light coming from the right which defines the contours of the mufti's voluminous robes and turban and casts a shadow behind him. Such features in Avadh painting have been thought to indicate a date after 1772–73 and the visit of Tilly Kettle to Faizabad, but since they are already found in the work of both Dip Chand and Mihr Chand in the early 1760s, we need not be constrained in assigning the mufti to a slightly earlier period, circa 1770, as befits its style.

#### MIR KALAN KHAN

Mir Kalan Khan used for many of his landscape backgrounds the more expansive type of Italianate landscape which we have already seen in the portrait of Farrukhsiyar (figure 10). His study of the death of Farhad on Mount Bisutun (figure 13) is most interesting for the beautifully imagined landscape which opens up naturalistically behind the tragic but perfunctorily handled scene in the foreground. Even though the story is from a medieval Persian poem, it is suggested with an immediacy made the more real by its naturalistically observed landscape background.

Mir Kalan Khan himself was one of the direct transmitters of the 17th-century imperial style to Faizabad. He began his career in the imperial studio of Muhammad Shah (r. 1719–48) in the 1730s. Like Mihr Chand he seems to have left Delhi for Avadh in the late 1750s. His magnificent lion hunt (figure 14), which must certainly date from before 1765, shows Navab Shuja' al-Daula slashing at a lion on the southern



bank of the Yamuna at Allahabad, with the Mughal fort and the united streams flowing at the top of the picture. This territory was shorn from Avadh in 1765, so that it is unlikely to be any later. In high imaginary bird's-eye viewpoint, the curve of the earth is visible. The massed ranks of hunters, elephants, and hangers-on diminish towards the top of the picture, although in true Indian fashion the navab in the centre foreground is obviously larger than anyone else in the picture. This is a picture under European influence only through this sort of landscape having been perfected in the Mughal studio under Jahangir and Shah Jahan, so that Mir Kalan Khan is using this inherited tradition to create a contemporary masterpiece.

In Mir Kalan Khan's painting of village life in Kashmir (figure 15), the European influence is

13  
The death of Farhad on Mount Bisutun, by Mir Kalan Khan. Faizabad, c. 1770. 18.1 x 13.4 cm. British Library, London, Johnson Album 9, no. 11. Reproduced by permission of the British Library Board.



Fig. 14. A royal lion hunt at Allahabad, by Mir Kalan Khan, 1760-65. 72 x 84.5 cm. Powis Castle, The Clive Collection (The National Trust), Welshpool. Reproduced by permission of The National Trust.



more direct. Although not a portraitist, Mir Kalan Khan was an adept portrayer of the human figure. In his Avadh paintings he is particularly fond of the three-quarter profile, largely abandoned in Indian painting since Jahangir's reign in favour of the full profile. The use of it in this painting suggests a conscious indebtedness to Europe, for it takes as its starting point the kind of village- or town-life pictures of Flemish artists such as Pieter Breughel the Elder, prints of whose work our artist must have seen. This is not, however, a copy of any known European picture, but rather an extended essay in this Europeanized style. The viewpoint is an imaginary one from on high, as in a Breughel original.

### CONCLUSION

By now, the openness of Mughal artists of this period to new influences will be apparent, as well as their eagerness to embrace different artistic traditions of depicting the reality of the world and its people, and their willingness to experiment with light and shadows; and all of these works, and many others which we have not had space to discuss, are datable before the actual visit to Faizabad of the British portrait painter Tilly Kettle in 1772-73. Mildred Archer has dealt with Kettle's work in Faizabad and some of the paintings produced by Faizabad artists in response to this. The developments, however, which we have seen in Avadh painting up to 1770 allow us to discuss two masterpieces of the Avadh school post-1773 without reference to Kettle's direct influence.

First-rate Avadhi painters were not overwhelmed by Kettle's influence, but perfected their own what might be called internally induced

14

A royal lion hunt at Allahabad, by Mir Kalan Khan. 1760-65. 72 x 84.5 cm.

Powis Castle,

The Clive Collection (The National Trust).

Chand: the attendants in the Fullarton portrait are instantly recalled by the musicians in this one. If the European is in fact Colonel Antoine Polier, then the painting cannot be before 1772–73 and Polier's arrival in Faizabad. Characteristic of what we believe to be Dip Chand's influence is the care Mihr Chand now takes with the rendition of the teapoy and the sofa, which is a long one supported by eight legs with stretchers, accurately and carefully represented. The sofa and the wall behind it recede in linear perspective, which suggests the depth of the terrace, in what otherwise would be more of a conventional Mughal terrace portrait. Also carried through from Dip Chand's work in Patna is a concern with light. The two front "Bengal lights" brilliantly illumine the colonel and the dancers, while the attendants and musicians being farther away are

not lit so brightly. These lights and the two farther back cast the shadows which are everywhere apparent in this painting: the attendants' shadows on the wall behind them and the musicians' shadows to the right, as well as smaller shadows underneath the lights themselves and back from the furniture legs.

Perhaps the most impressive portrait of the Avadh school, which carries into perfect practice the newly discovered necessity of making the sitter appear to exist in a totally naturalistic space, is a portrait of John Wombwell, the Paymaster and Auditor-General to the navab's troops under British command from 1780 (figure 16). Seated in a "Burgomaster" chair and smoking a huqqa, he gazes pensively out of an open door, while behind him an attendant waves a *morchbal*. The painting is remarkable

15

A gathering in Kashmir, by Mir Kalar Khan. Faizabad, c. 1760. 28.8 x 33.5 cm. British Library, London, Add.Or.3. Reproduced by permission of the British Library Board.

16

(facing page)  
John Wombwell, attributed here to Dip Chand. c. 1780. 28 x 19 cm. From the collection of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, Geneva, and reproduced with his kind permission.







17  
Colonel Polier relaxing  
at a nautch, by Mihr  
Chand. 1775–80.  
29 x 39.6 cm. From  
the collection of Prince  
Sadruddin Aga Khan,  
Geneva, and  
reproduced with his  
kind permission.

not only for the physical presence of the two figures but also for the minutely and beautifully observed space which they inhabit. The room has plastered walls on which hang a greenish textile, with dramatic red and white chevron borders, and four pictures, with a red millefleur carpet underfoot. The two visible pictures are of exactly the sort of receding landscape which would have influenced the artist of 'Alivardi Khan out hunting (figure 2). The green hanging defines the contours of the sitter while its perfectly suggested distance behind him defines his physical presence. The light from the right through the open door falls brilliantly on Wombwell's face, and casts shadows behind him, while the back wall with its hanging and pictures is seen as moving from the shade to the light in the reverse direction. Although at first sight Wombwell's is a pure profile portrait, this

is not in fact so. His chair is slightly at an angle to the picture plane, so that his body can be painted in the traditional Mughal viewpoint, even though his far shoulder is scarcely visible and hence more realistically observed than tradition would dictate. His right leg crossed over his left brilliantly parallels the profiled face. This concern with subtle angles links this painting with the work of Dip Chand in Patna, the portrait of Ashraf 'Ali Khan in particular (figure 5), while the attendant recalls the steward in his portrait of William Fullarton (figure 3). This is perhaps a late work by Dip Chand, the culmination of his work at his most European. Both this painting and that with Polier reflect to a consummate degree the ways in which Indian artists who were concerned with light, space, and volume in their paintings subtly transformed their European influences into something totally Indian.



17  
Colonel Polier relaxing  
at a nautch, by Mihr  
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NOTE

1. That this portrait can indeed be given to Dip Chand is further suggested by a portrait of the Emperor Shah 'Alam II recently appearing in a Sotheby's New York sale (Indian and Southeast Asian Art, March 20, 2001, lot 24) which is an exact parallel in mirror reverse.

The New York painting is inscribed on the back *W.F. 1764* indicating again its provenance in Fullarton's collection at Patna. The Berlin painting would have been done for Polier after a now lost version done for Fullarton (unless of course Fullarton simply gave or sold his painting to Polier).

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