

Stories of 19th Century Painters of Lahore

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Artists are an integral part of society and have their own way of telling history through their art works. For present research, five paintings have been selected that represent a unique manner of telling the contemporary events of the troubled period of Sikh Rule. However, this has been done in a subtle manner and goes almost unnoticed. In the present research, the paintings will be studied not only from an artistic perspective but will also be dealt with from the socio-political and historical dimensions present in them.

An important contribution of Lahore, during the 19th century, was in the art of painting. The first fifty years of the said century celebrated a style that had acquired a distinctive characteristic of its own in the past centuries. This style continued till 1860s before it changed under the British government. The artefacts produced in those days had a true spirit of oriental arts with a special flavor of Lahore. British influence was yet to come and we experience the pure taste of the fine arts of the subcontinent.

Many types of paintings were executed in Lahore but the most important were miniature paintings, book illustrations, frescoes and ivories. They may be categorized in the following subjects: portraits, court scenes, equestrian figures, religious themes and domestic scenes. Most of the art produced was based on the portraits of Sikh rulers as they were the main patrons and liked to have their likenesses painted.

We have references of innumerable painters working in Lahore. Hukama Singh, Muhammad Bakhsh, Jivan Ram, Abdullah Painter, Muhammad Azeem, Mian Noor Muhammad, Kishen Singh, Bishan Singh, Lal Singh, Hira Singh, Habib Ullah, Qazi Lutfullah and many more. They were all painters of high merit.¹

A very important name in the list is Keher Singh. He was a man of great talent. K. C. Aryan wrote a very interesting story associated with Keher

Singh of how he painted the picture of a dead sparrow and “coaxed a sweeper of Lahore court to place it on the throne of Ranjit Singh. The trick worked and Keher Singh was hired as a court painter”.²

Darbar Maharaja Sher Singh

Figure 1

'*Darbar* Maharaja Sher Singh' by Keher Singh, 1842-46, Faqir Khana Museum, Lahore.

'*Darbar* (court) Maharaja Sher Singh' is an important painting of Keher Singh (Figure 1). Sher Singh was born in 1807 but Ranjit Singh refused to acknowledge him as his son. Later, at the insistence of his wife Mehtab Kaur and her mother Sada Kaur, he accepted him.³ After the death of Naunehal Singh, Sher Singh was enthroned in 1841, defeating the party of Chand Kaur, wife of Kharak Singh. As Sher Singh came to power he confiscated the property of the Sindhianwala Sardars who had helped Chand Kaur. This made the Sindhianwala Sardars his mortal enemies. Sher Singh was killed in 1843 by Ajit Singh Sindhianwala.⁴

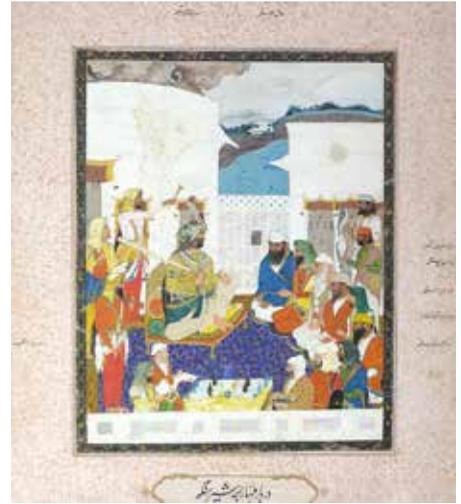


Figure 2

Detail '*Darbar* Maharaja Sher Singh'

The painting shows Maharaja Sher Singh sitting in the middle and in front of him are courtiers of the Sikh *Darbar* including Bhai Ram Singh, Raja Dhian Singh, Wah Mian Singh, Sardar Itar Singh Kalianwala, Raja Hira Singh and Sardar Budh Singh Sindhianwala, Lehna Singh Sindhianwala and Ajeet Singh Sindhianwala. Behind these courtiers are two servants standing, holding falcons in their hands. The detail of these falcons is amazing. At the back of the Maharaja are three men who are servants and guards. The Maharaja





Figure 3

Detail '*Darbar*
Maharaja Sher
Singh'

is heavily jewelled with a decorated crown (Figure 2). There is a sword resting on his shoulder. The courtiers are looking at him with an intent look in their eyes.

The location of the painting is Naulakha pavilion inside Shish Mahal, Lahore Fort. River Ravi can be seen outside the fort wall. The arches of Kamran's *Baradari*, minarets of Jahangir's tomb and a faint outline of the dome of Asif Jah's tomb are visible in the distance (Figure 3). Dark clouds are also seen on the top of Naulakha Pavilion where Sher Singh is sitting and if we look at the clouds very closely, we see five tiny angels throwing petals on the Maharaja (Figure 4).

This painting was painted after Sher Singh was murdered and these were the troubled times of Sikh rule and Lahore *darbar* was full of intrigues and treacheries. The courtiers were divided in many groups and every group was bloodthirsty for the other. Since the artist is a product of society, he cannot detach himself from his surroundings.



Figure 4

Detail '*Darbar*
Maharaja Sher
Singh'

Figure 5

Detail 'Darbar
Maharaja Sher
Singh'.

This rule applies on this painting where we see the cunning faces of some of Sher Singh's courtiers who were plotting his murder at that very moment. Each and every figure has been carefully observed and painted. Study of the faces of the characters painted reveals some interesting facts. Three people sitting in front of Sher Singh were not involved in the conspiracy of his murder and they were Bhai Ram Singh, Wah Mian Singh and Itar Singh. They are looking at the Maharaja quite innocently but the rest who were involved in the Maharaja's murder have a very intense look in their eyes. The artist has not only observed but also recorded this phenomenon very carefully by making the eyes of all the traitors wider than usual and showing the white in them (Figure 5).

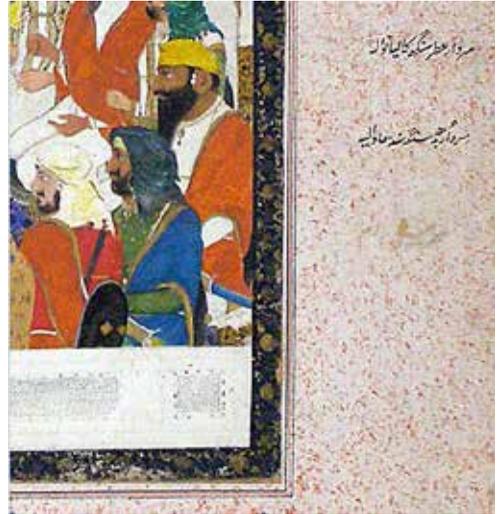


Figure 6

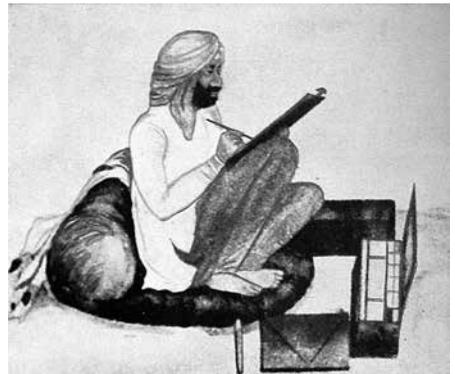
Detail 'Darbar
Maharaja Sher
Singh'.

At the front is Dina Nath, holding a pen and paper. There are many utensils around and it looks as if he is making entries of these objects. Opposite Dina Nath is a servant with a tray of jewels in his hand. An interesting character to notice is a painter sitting beside Dina Nath, working on an incomplete painting of an equestrian figure (Figure 6). The face that we see is that of Keher Singh, the painter himself. We can identify him by the features that are the same, which can be seen in his self-portrait published by K. C. Aryan titled 'Keher Singh at Work' (Figure 7).



Figure 7

Keher Singh at
Work' by Keher
Singh, published in
K. C. Aryan's book,
Punjab Painting.



This painting is also a testimony that it was some special occasion on which Sher Singh is receiving gifts and a list of the objects is being prepared. To record the whole event, the court painter was asked to paint it, which is evidence of the fact that the artists were allowed to sit in the court to portray the royal personalities and events. An interesting point to notice is a painting on Keher Singh's knee that reveals an incomplete image of Maharaja Sher Singh on a horseback.



Figure 8

'Maharaja Sher Singh on a Horseback' by Keher Singh, 1842-46, Faqir Khana Museum, Lahore.

Maharaja Sher Singh on Horseback

This is the completed version of the painting that could be seen in 'Darbar Sher Singh' (Figure 8). The Maharaja is wearing a helmet embellished with jewels and a plume, holding a spear in his hand that is going diagonally across the picture frame. He is wearing European style trousers indicating the direct influence of European officers in his court.

It was understood that the artists of the subcontinent did not sit with the model but painted with the help of memory. However, here in this painting, the artist Keher Singh is sitting in front of his model and painting him on the spot.

Bawa Lakh Ram

One museum that has never been associated with Keher Singh is the National Museum Karachi where one of his signed paintings has been discovered. It is titled 'Bawa Lakh Ram'. On the lower side of the painting, an inscription says '*Baqalam Banda Keher Singh Musawwir*', that is, 'From the Pen of Humble Keher Singh Painter' (Figure 9).

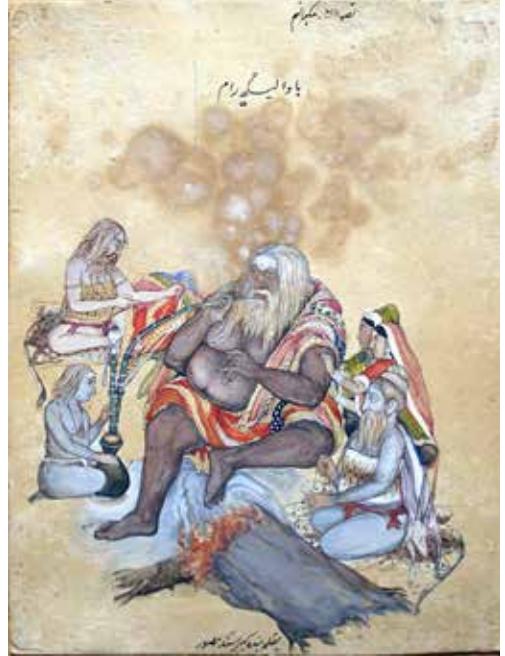
The dominating figure in the middle is a *Bawa* (old gentleman), sitting near a burnt tree trunk, with a *Huqqah* (smoking pipe) and smoke is coming out of his lips. He has a dark complexion with long white hair and a beard. His head is covered with ash and there is a vermilion *Tilak* (dot) on his forehead. His naked body is draped with a wrap that has a beautifully colored design. He is a huge tall person as compared

Figure 9

Bawa Lakh Ram'
by Keher Singh,
1830-40, Karachi
Museum.

to the people around him. Two women are serving him. The features and the dresses of the women are of nomadic origin. Respect and fear are prominent on their naïve faces.

A man in the back is sitting on a tiger skin. His upper body is also covered with tiger skin and a red string is used as loincloth. He is holding some very colorful pieces of clothes and among them one can observe a small grotesque face painted in blue color. This is a strange element that shows that the painting has some kind of symbolic value.



Although there are detailed accounts of a few other ascetics who belonged to Ranjit Singh's era published in various books⁵ but Lakh Ram is not one of them. Initially, no reference was found but intense research revealed that a *Mahant* (chief priest) named Lakh Ram lived during Ranjit Singh's time. He was mentioned in the memoirs written by Faqir Sayyad Qamar ul Din who was the son of the Maharaja's right hand man, Faqir Sayyad Noor ul Din. These memoirs have a very interesting narration about *Bawa* Lakh Ram. Faqir Qamar ul Din narrates, "During the Sikh era, *Mahants* were very well respected and people provided them with the finest food. As a result, they would become very fat and extremely lazy. One such example is Lakh Ram who could not travel on anything but an elephant due to his extraordinary weight. One day this *Mahant* came to visit Faqir Sayyad Noor ul Din. He used the high platform of the house to get down from the elephant with the assistance of three or four men and even this small exercise tired him so much that it took a while before he could catch his breath.

When Lakh Ram could talk, Malik Saif ul Din, who was teaching the children of the Faqir family, asked the *Mahant*, "*Mahant ji* please tell me how much you eat?" First, the *Mahant* complained about the weakness

of his stomach. Then he said very sadly, "Early morning I can only eat two big *Koondas* (big containers) of curd with five *ser* (almost a kilo) of *Khand* (sugar). Since I cannot digest *Roti* (bread), so I survive barely by drinking *Yakhni* (stock) of two goats but in the evening I have some craving for sweets and six *ser Mithai* (almost 6 kilo sweets) is all I can eat." He felt sorry for himself that he could not drink milk late at night because of lack of appetite. At that time, Faqir Sayyad Noor ul Din heard about Lakh Ram's arrival and came to see him. He gave the *Mahant* five hundred rupees as he was leaving and all the men around him had to go through the ordeal of mounting 'one elephant on the other one'.⁶

The style of this painting is quite different from Keher Singh's other paintings that have been discussed earlier. From some angles it looks like a caricature of the main person, which supports the humorous description of the *Mahant* by Faqir Sayyad Qamar ul Din.

There are innumerable paintings in a number of museums of the world that were painted by the artists of Lahore. Unfortunately, most of them are not identified as Lahore paintings and are labelled either as unknown, Sikh, Punjab or Pahari paintings. Nobody knows about the artists but many of them are of high aesthetic value. Raja Dhian Singh and Maharaja Sher Singh is one of them.

Maharaja Sher Singh and Raja Dhian Singh

Sher Singh and Dhian Singh were two important members of the Sikh regime after Ranjit Singh. Dhian Singh was the second brother of the three Dogra brothers who rose to prominence in the court of Ranjit Singh. He was the father of boy favorite, Hira Singh. After the death of Naunehal Singh, Dhian Singh very strongly advocated the cause of Sher Singh and as a result was later killed by the same Sindhianwala Sardars who murdered Sher Singh.⁷ This painting has been mentioned in the memoirs of



Figure 10

Maharaja Sher Singh and Raja Dhian Singh' by an unknown artist, 1840-50, Lahore Museum.

Figure 11

Detail 'Maharaja
Sher Singh and Raja
Dhian Singh'.



Faqir Khana archives. According to the records, every Sikh Maharaja received unusual gifts from the British Governor General, including clocks and watches. Here, Sher Singh has been given a watch and he is showing it to Dhian Singh who is looking at it with amazement. Both of them are sitting opposite each other (Figure 10). Maharaja Sher Singh's jewels are magnificent and he is wearing the Kohinoor on his arm. The background sky is of particular interest where three angels are partially hidden in the clouds (Figure 11). The style of these angels is a clear influence of Europe and the artist seems to be aware of the young science of perspective. They are showering red petals. A very peculiar thing to notice is a devil like figure camouflaged in the dark clouds of the sky. It is concealed so cleverly that it goes unnoticed unless someone looks closely. The same style of angels hidden in the sky can be seen in the painting titled '*Darbar* of Maharaja Sher Singh' previously discussed.

A Man with a *Huqqah* and Dancing Girl (The Amazons of Ranjit Singh)

A very interesting aspect of the Sikh *Darbar* were the Amazons of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, which consisted of one hundred and twenty five very young and beautiful dancing girls. The maximum age for these girls was twenty-five and after that they were bestowed to some important courtiers. To maintain their numbers, new girls were brought from the cities of Punjab and Kashmir. They are mentioned in many books. W. G. Osborne also encountered these lovely warriors, "In the evening, a detachment of the Amazons arrived with music and fireworks".⁸ He gave another detail that they used to appear on horseback, mounted *en cavalier*, for the amusement of the Maharaja.⁹



Figure 12:

'A Man with a *Huqqah* (smoking pipe) and Dancing Girl or The Amazons of Ranjit Singh' by an unknown artist, 1840-50, Lahore Museum.

The attributes observed in this incomplete painting are of the same girls, which is one of the rarest depictions of Ranjit Singh's Amazons (Figure 12). They were trained to dance with shield and sword and here we can see a fragile looking girl trained by a huge man who is teaching her how to dance while carrying such heavy armour.¹⁰ There is a smaller man who has two tambourines tied around his waist. Another musical instrument *Sitar* is lying in front of them. The painting is devoid of any details and it merely depicts the three characters. Musarrat Hasan described this picture as "an unfinished water color, small picture which must have been the forerunner to the many small water color finished paintings".¹¹

Faqir Waheed ul Din in his book, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, gives details about these girls that at one time the *prima donna* of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's *Darbar* was a singer known as Billo¹² who also commanded the company of Amazons. There is also a description of their dress code by Faqir Waheed ul Din, "Their uniform was as follows: a lemon yellow *Banarsi* turban with a bejewelled crest; a dark green jumper over a blue satin gown, fastened with a gold belt; deep crimson skin tight pyjamas of *Gulbadan*; silk and a pair of golden shoes. As for jewellery, they wore a pair of gold earrings set with stones, a diamond nose stud, a pair of golden bracelets and a ruby ring on the middle finger."¹³ These were

colorful creatures of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's *Darbar* and this sketch/painting is a rare depiction of those girls.

Paintings with such details are another dimension of people's history told by the artists. They have their way of communication and these stories are told in such an effective manner that they reach out to the spectator even today.

Endnotes

- 1 Musarrat Hasan, *Painting in the Punjab Plains 1842-1945* (Lahore: Ferozsons Private Limited 1998), 131.
- 2 K. C. Aryan, *Punjab Painting* (Patiala: Punjab University, 1975), 20.
- 3 F. S. Aijazuddin, *Pahari Paintings and Sikh Portraits in the Lahore Museum* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1977), 80.
- 4 Surwarcha Paul, *Sikh Miniatures in Chandigarh Museum* (A Hand List) (Chandigarh: 1985), 61.
- 5 W. G. Osborne, *Court and Camp of Ranjit Singh* (London: 1840), 123-129.
- 6 Memoirs of Faqir Qamar ul Din, Archives of Faqir Khana Museum.
- 7 Surwarcha Paul, *Sikh Miniatures in Chandigarh Museum* (A Hand List) (Chandigarh: 1985), 62.
- 8 W. G. Osborne, *Court and Camp of Ranjit Singh* (London: 1840), 95.
- 9 Ibid., 96.
- 10 In one of his interviews, Faqir Saif ul Din, curator/director of Faqir Khana Museum, confirmed the identity of the dancing girl as one of the Amazon girls of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.
- 11 Musarrat Hasan, *Painting in the Punjab Plains 1842-1945* (Lahore: Ferozsons Private Limited 1998), 66.
- 12 Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, (Karachi: Lion Art Press 1965), 177.
- 13 Ibid., 178.