

Early Portrayal of Punjabi Women

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There is reference in literature to portraits of women but none has been preserved from ancient times. Images of women are, however, a recurring theme with the miniaturists of both the Mughal Courts and the Rajput Kingdoms. The aim of this art was not realistic portrayal of persons but to depict the essence of human joy, ecstasy and anguish. These pictures highlight the elusive nature of a woman because of her seclusion from the public gaze and represent the exotic and almost unattainable beauty that the ideal woman was conceived to possess.

Women of the sub-continent have been considered among the most beautiful in the world and their charms have been celebrated by poets and bards down the ages. Among them, the pride of place has been held by Punjabi women, extolled for their extraordinary beauty, grace and seductive charm. Mughal kings and nobles sought them out to embellish their *harems* (the separate part of a household reserved for wives, concubines and female servants). There was Anarkali who became a legend as she allured Prince Salim with her grace and charm and even led him to stage a revolt against his father, the Emperor Akbar. Salim, on ascending the throne as Jahangir, built a mausoleum for Anarkali in Lahore and the famous bazaar of the city is named after her as well. Rana-Dil was another Punjabi woman who enchanted Dara-Shikoh, son of Emperor Shahjahan, who allowed him to marry her and she was granted the same privileges and honor as other princesses. During the later Mughal period, we come across Lal Kunwar, a dancing girl, whose glamour and charm became part of folklore. Her romance with Jahandar Shah, the grandson of Aurangzeb, was the most adventurous one. A consummate singer, her melodious voice, sparkling wit and vivacious dance movements endeared her to one and all. When Jahandar Shah ascended the throne, he conferred on her the title of Imtiaz Mahal, the Chosen one of the Palace, who also came to be known as the "Singing Empress".

Figure 1

Maharani Jind Kaur,
wife of Maharaja
Ranjit Singh, painted
by a Punjabi artist
at Lahore (c. 1860)

During the Sikh rule, there was a young Muslim beauty called Moran who enchanted the Lion of the Punjab - Maharaja Ranjit Singh - and became his favorite mistress. Then there was Maharani Jind Kaur, the youngest wife of the Maharaja, famous for her attractive looks and domineering personality. The surviving portraits of her bear testimony to her loveliness and eye appeal (Figure 01). According to Sir Herbert Edwards, she had more wit and daring than any man of her nation.



The institution of the *Zenana* (part of a house reserved for the women and girls of a household) and the *Purdah* (a veil or screen used to separate the women from men or strangers) had come into vogue with the advent of Muslim rule and it continued till the beginning of the 20th century. Punjab came under the British Rule in 1849. By that time the racial gulf between the ruler and the ruled was firmly established. Till the early decades of the 19th century, it was quite common for the British civilians and soldiers to have native women as their *bibis* or unofficial wives. This practice came to be frowned upon and virtually vanished by the time the British came to the Punjab.

Figure 2

Portrait of Bannu Pan
Dei, wife of General
Allard of Maharaja
Ranjit Singh's army,
by a Lahori artist,
presumably Imam
Bux Lahori (c.1837)

Some European generals employed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh had married Punjabi women. There is a portrait of General Jean-Francois Allard's Punjabi wife, Pan Dei by a famous Lahore artist Imam Bux (c. 1837) (Figure 02). Sir Charles Metcalfe, one of the most distinguished and talented officers of the East India Company, lived with a Sikh lady he had met during a diplomatic mission to Ranjit Singh's



court in 1809. His romantic and unorthodox liaison with this Punjabi woman was then a common topic of gossip but Metcalfe made no secret of it or about his three sons from her.

As a great patron of performing arts, the 'Lion of the Punjab' maintained a troupe of 150 beautiful dancing girls and entertained his guests with nautch parties (Figures 03 and 04). W. G. Osborne, who accompanied Governor General Auckland to Ranjit Singh's court at Lahore, recalls in his journal an interesting

conversation with the Maharaja about these beautiful girls. "How do you like them", asked Ranjit Singh, "are they handsomer than the women of Hindostan? Are they as handsome as English women?" Osborne replied that he admired them all very much and named the two he thought were the handsomest. Emily Eden, the sister of Auckland, who also accompanied him to Lahore, was invited to meet the *Ranis* (queens). She was struck by their beauty and grace and wrote that "four of them were very handsome. Two would have been beautiful anywhere". Sher Singh's wife is also described as really beautiful, "petite, very fair with enormous black eyes and a pretty, clever expression". Henry Stenbach, a German soldier with the Maharaja, pays a glowing tribute to the valor, daring and fortitude of the *Ranis* of Ranjit Singh as they

performed *sati* (the former Hindu practice of a widow throwing herself on to her husband's funeral pyre) on his death. In his vivid description of the event, he wrote: "His four queens dressed in their most sumptuous apparel, then followed, each in a separate gilt chair and before each of the queens was carried a large mirror and gilt parasol, the emblems of their rank. To the last moment of this terrible sacrifice, the queens exhibited the most perfect equanimity; far from evincing any dread of the terrible



Figure 3

Nautch girl with musicians by a Lahori artist (c.1860)



Figure 4

Portrait of a dancing girl of Lahore by G. T. Vigne (c. 1835)

death which awaited them, they appeared in a high state of excitement and ascended the funeral pyre with alacrity”.

Until the middle of the 18th century, there was practically no visual record of the Indian population based on first hand observation. Travellers had carried home tales of kings and their hordes of dusky beauties dripping with pearls and diamonds in gauzy veils, lying in the *harems* or reclining in marble palaces or in royal gardens which bore little relation to reality. British artists began arriving in India from the 1760's onwards in search of fame and fortune. Most of them applied their talents to landscape painting, portraits of the ruling elite and Indian princes or historical events of imperial interest. There were some, both professional and amateur, who were inspired to depict the real India with its exotic people, especially the native women. Historian Robert Orme (1753) had already aroused their curiosity with his remarks, “nature seems to have showered beauty on the fairer sex throughout Indostan (sic) with a more lavish hand than in most other countries”.

Ladies of the aristocracy in the cities, whether Hindu or Muslim, used to observe *pardah*. This practice was considered a mark of delicacy and refinement as well as an essential part of a respectable way of life. Hence, there was much curiosity about these ladies and their daily life. The *Zenana* was perceived as a world of mystery and intrigue. These women were inaccessible to artists until the beginning of the 20th century. Other women who came into contact with English *Sahibs* (a polite title or form of address for a man) were the *bibis*, the nautch girls and the female servants. In the countryside, however, they saw women young and old out in the open as rural life was generally free from *pardah*. Fairs, festivals and religious processions also offered the best opportunities for viewing native women from all classes.

Just as landscape painting was influenced by the British concept of ‘picturesque,’ the Western concept of beauty had its impact in the portrayal of native women. William Hodges, the first British professional artist to visit India in 1780, acknowledged that his portrayal of Indian women was based on ideas of classical beauty. He was in raptures after seeing village women at the *ghats* (stepped well). He watched them bathing, observing that the younger women in particular delayed and lingered, “sporting and playing like Naiads or Syrens”. He remarked that, “To a painter’s mind, the fine antique figures never fail to present themselves

when he observes a beautiful female form ascending these steps from the river in wet drapery, which perfectly displays the whole person and with vases on their heads, carrying water to the temples”.

The delightful sight of women at the river *ghats* inspired many a Company official and soldier to record his impressions in diaries and journals. Lieutenant Thomas Bacon was captivated by the grace and charm of women at the *ghats* of the Ganges and noted that they would make any Englishwoman envious. Bishop Reginald Heber of Calcutta (1823-26) was not immune to feminine charms and has made many references to pretty young women in his journal ‘Narrative of a Journey’. Heber was also greatly attracted by their skin color and pointed out that “the deep bronze tint was more naturally agreeable to the human eyes than the fair skins of Europe”. This view was also endorsed by William Huggins in his ‘Sketches of India’ (1824) as he wrote that “Indian woman’s soft expression and delicate tounure of countenance make us forget the difference of complexions, or rather convince us that complexion does not constitute the desirable in a woman”.

British artists have left behind many paintings and drawings of native women of different classes. There were also Indian artists patronized by the British. They imbibed some of the western techniques and adapted their painting style to meet the taste of their patrons. There is an enormous collection of their drawings in different museums and galleries in India and abroad and these are defined as ‘Company School’ paintings. The British officials and travellers employed local artists at Lahore and Amritsar to make drawings for them depicting the famous monuments of the Punjab and also the local people. Punjabi women, however, rarely figure in this collection.

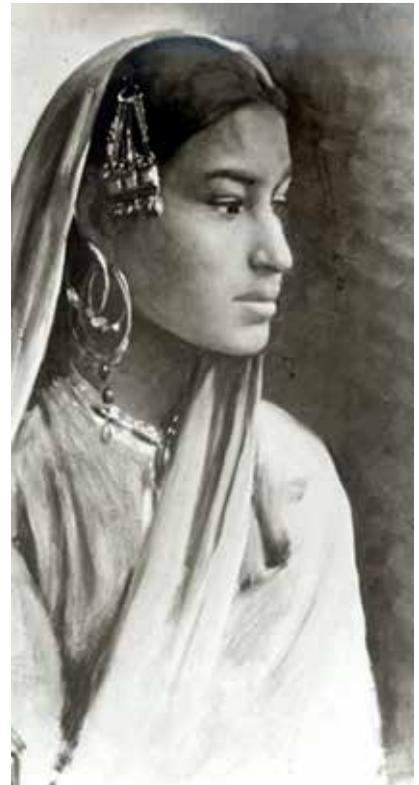
Among the few British artists who came to the Punjab in the 19th century were G. T. Vigne, A. F. P. Harcourt, H. A. Oldfield and William Simpson. Their works chiefly depict the Punjab’s picturesque landscape, historical monuments and such. Even Emily Eden, an accomplished artist who had an access to the Royal *Zenana*, did not portray any Punjabi ladies in her monumental work, ‘Portraits of the Princes and People of India’, which include magnificent paintings of Ranjit Singh, his sons and other Sikh personalities.

The Punjabi women observed strict *pardah* and would not expose themselves to any male artists, whether foreign or native. There are practically no true to life pictures of Punjabi women of the upper classes. There is one by a local artist of Maharani Jindan who had come out of the veil to become the regent of Duleep Singh. The only women who readily agreed to pose for artists were public entertainers and dancing girls. The Princes and aristocracy took pride in patronizing accomplished dancing girls and usually invited the ruling *Sahibs* to their dance parties. Those belonging to lower working classes agreed to appear before the artist in exchange for monetary reward. At times, the artists were able to sketch the village women as the *pardah* custom was not prevalent in rural areas.

It was observed that Punjabi women were particularly fond of jewelry. A variety of ornaments made by highly skilled craftsmen were worn from head to toe. Emily Eden describes in her journal the gorgeous costumes and ornaments worn by the royal ladies at Lahore. She wrote, "Their heads look too large from the quantity of pearls with which they load them and their nose-rings conceal all the lower part of the face and hang down almost to the waist. First, a crescent of diamond comes from the nose and to that is hung a string of pearls and tassels of pearls and rings of pearls with emerald drops". Their dress consisted of silver gauze veils, tinselly tunics and very tight trousers. An Austrian artist Rudolf Swaboda (1859-1914), commissioned by Queen Victoria to make portraits of her Indian subjects, painted a young Punjabi girl of the sweeper caste wearing jewelry (Figure 5). The most striking portrait of a Punjabi woman titled 'Native Lady of Umritsar', wearing a traditional rich costume embroidered with gold and loaded with jewels from head to toe, by a British artist Van Smith c. 1880, adorns a wall in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Figure 6).

Figure 5

Portrait of Munni Mehtrani of the Sweeper Caste, Lahore, painted by Rudolf Swaboda (c. 1887)



The women in the Punjabi hills were neither shy nor followed the *purdah* custom. They are described in contemporary accounts as tall and straight, free from guile and quite talkative with a good sense of humor. Among the British artists drawn to the scenic beauty of the Punjab hills and the local people were A. F. P Harcourt and William Simpson. Their portrayal of hill women captures their romantic image and charm. Little wonder, some *Sahibs* captivated by their alluring appearances and winsome manners took these 'daughters of nature' as their partners and chose to settle down with them in the exhilarating environs of the hills. Some British professional artists, notably William Carpenter and Simpson, did succeed in making sketches of women of the Punjabi hills (Figure 7).

After the advent of the camera, commercial photography rapidly replaced painting by artists. Here again when it came to Punjabi women, they did not want to face the camera wielded by a man. It was only after the spread of education and the emancipation of women in the 20th century that the old taboos of *purdah* and seclusion were slowly discarded. I recall that considering the market potential in this field, an enterprising Punjabi lady in Lahore set up a special photo studio for women in the late 1930s.

The romanticized image of Punjabi women has been vividly captured in the folklore and love legends of Punjab such as Heer Ranjha, Sohni Mahiwal, Mirza Sahiban, Sehti



 Figure 6

Portrait of a native lady of 'Umritsar' wearing a full set of jewelry and a gold embroidered costume, painted by Van Smith (c. 1880)



 Figure 7

Portrait of Hira Mal from Chini, Punjab hills, painted by William Simpson (c. 1860)

Murad, Balo-Mayia and more. Poets and bards have used superlative terms to describe the fair and wheatish complexion of Punjabi women. Others have sung praises of their chiseled features, lustrous eyes and robust health. That reminds me of an old Punjabi lyric '*Shishe nun taredh pai gayi, wal wondi ne dhyan jadon marya* (The force of her gaze drove a crack in the mirror as she looked at it while combing her hair). A mid-19th century folk song portrays a young maiden from the Maja region of the Punjab.

*Maje di mastani jati/Amarsar navaan chali/Amarsar jaiyai te ki/Kuj liahiye/
Mauli, dandasa, kangi patti/Patti oh maya- Maje di mastani jati.*

The happy go lucky Jat maiden is going to Amritsar for a dip in the *sarovar* or holy tank and from there she would do her shopping of red thread, dentifrice, comb and ribbon.

The romantic expressions used by young lovers contain the most extraordinary similes. The lover is addressed as *chan* (moon) or *sona* (handsome) and the beloved as *soni* (the beautiful or the gilded one). Some ardent lovers use the simile of a rose bud as in the following couplet: *Sun kudiye Punjab diye,/Dukh tainu kis gal da hai Soniye/Sun Kale gulab diye.* (Listen dear Punjabi beauty, what is troubling you my rose bud). Another noteworthy point is that the lover treats the beloved and vice versa as equal partners in the game of love as is evident from the expression of calling each other *Hani* meaning companion or partner.

The women's costume both in the rural and urban Punjab has been *suthan jhaga* or *salwar kameez* for over a century. In spite of various changes in fashion, this attire has not only survived but has now been universally adopted by women of all age groups throughout the sub-continent. The *chuni* or the head cover, which goes along with the dress, is the most graceful part of the costume.

Punjabi women were known to be fastidious about their personal appearance. They used traditional cosmetics and beauty aids for their hair, eyelids, eyebrows, teeth, lips and hands. For their face, they used a kind of pomade made of orange peels ground fine upon a stone and mixed with *besan* or a paste of wheat flour mixed with butter, cream and ghee. They used *kajal* (kohl) to add glamour to their eyes. There is an amusing couplet about it: '*Kinwain pavan main akhian ch kajala, ke akhian ch tu wasda*' (How can I put *kajal* in my eyes because you are residing there).

Postscript

All these pictures are sourced from 'Beyond the Veil' and 'Marvels of Indian Painting' authored by me.