



A Search for the '*Darshan*' of Sikh Gurus among Pahari Rulers

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General Note

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ABSTRACT

Between fluctuating Rajput and Sikh sponsorships, presence of various versions of portrayals of Sikh Gurus in Guler style, emerged due to sudden adjustments for Sikh themes, create suspicions about their real likeness. The study investigates the sources of imaginary likeness and alterations & adaptations of Rajput idioms in a series of portraits of Gurus twisted in Guler style during early nineteenth century caused by substitution of sponsorship from Rajput to Sikh aristocracy, when Guler family of painters forced to adjust the iconography of Gurus under Rajput influences. The study also attempts to seek the artists, who contributed in this series. The study is centered on data analysis and review of literature. Empirical method is applied to write the paper.

Key words: Iconography, Influence, Inspiration, Ideal, Imagination, Sikhism, Rajput, Pahari

1. BACKGROUND

Till the mid of eighteenth century, Rajput Rajas of Punjab hills could not repel the rising tide of the Sikhs and several hill principalities became tributary to Jassa Singh Ramgarhia in 1770 (Gupta, 2007, Vol. IV, 280). With the advancement of Sikh power in hills, artists also got opportunities to paint Sikh themes. *Darshan* of Sikh Gurus from the plains of Punjab also travelled with the Sikh

misaldars & devotees and fell in the hands of Pahari artists. It is sure because real likenesses of Guru Hargobind and Guru Har Rai were copied several times in the hilly areas. But lack of portraits of early Sikh Gurus forced the artists to experiment with their iconographies. Although, the illuminated copy of Bhai Banno is an evidence of the employment of scribes under early Sikh community in Lahore for copying and illuminating the Sikh texts during seventeenth century. The interaction between scribes and manuscript illustrators was also not new and sometimes, scribes were also good illustrators. But development of portraiture is not seen during pre-Mughal period. Existence of portraits of Mughal Emperor Babaur, a contemporary of Guru Nanak, also has been analyzed many times by scholars and assumed as Akbar period, because the native artists of the pre-Mughal era had certainly not been concerned with portraiture as such or even with characterization. Male and female faces were conventional and painted more or less to a schematic. But under the supervision of the Persian masters, the Indian artists were in progress to mature an understanding of likenesses and a zealous sense of representation, which they finally carried to a level of accomplishment scarcely seen even in Persian painting (Khandalavala, 1974, 73).

2. ALTERATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS OF HILL AND SIKH CONVENTIONS

Today, easily identifiable imaginary portraits of Guru Nanak, Guru Angad, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjun Dev are subsist in various collections, wearing band turbans of seventeenth century Shah Jahani fashion, often ascribed to the Pahari painters of eighteenth- nineteenth centuries by scholars. The absence of original portrayals of Gurus in hilly areas forced the portraitists to experiment the iconography of Sikh legendary portraits. This type of experimentations and adjustments firstly commenced in Bilaspur from mid- seventeenth century, in which the facial features of princely figure has resemblance with Raja Dip Chand of Kahlur (Kour and Sharma, 2019, fig. 6).

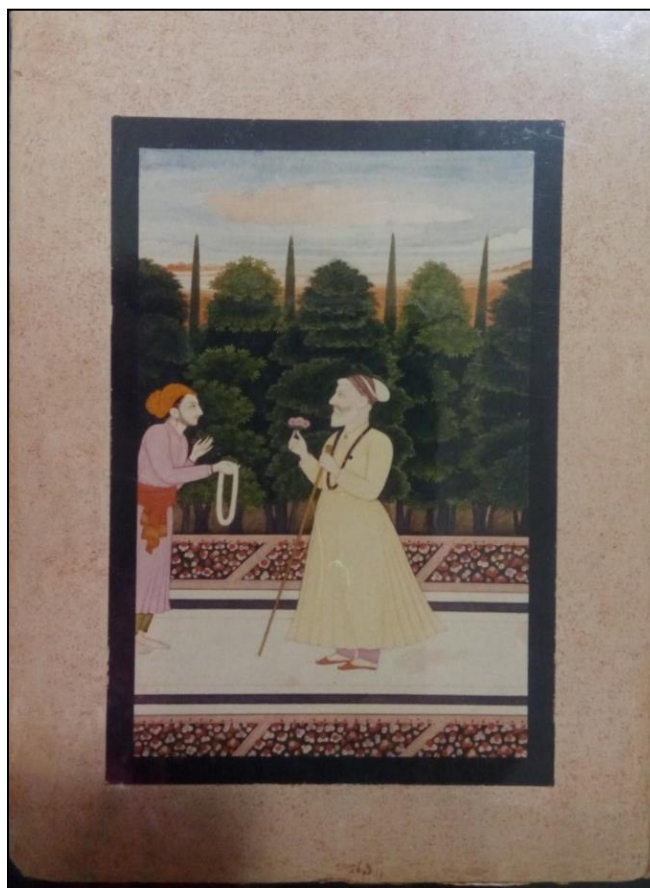


Figure 1 Guru Har Rai, Guler- Basohli, (Courtesy: Chandigarh Museum, acc. no. 3430)

For the Pahari painters, their Rajput masters were ideal, and they adjusted their Rajput patrons for the renderings of Sikh Gurus to gratify their Sikh masters. Various series of portraits emerged through the hands of Guler painters. A series of portraits came from Sardar Mohan Singh collection (Archer, 1966, figs. 1- 6), in which facial features and stances of Sikh Gurus are wholly imaginary, except Guru Har Rai's iconography (fig. 1), which is inspired by Raja Amrit Pal (1757-1776) of Basohli (fig. 2). Guru Har Rai was

habitual of *bairagan* (arm-rest), and the artist replaced sword of Raja Amrit Pal of Basohli with *bairagan*. Artist also adjusted the style of turban of Basohli ruler (fig. 2) for Guru's likeness (fig. 1), and the fashion of band- turban goes back to seventeenth century. Attendant serving the garland to the Guru (fig. 1) is also of last quarter of eighteenth century. The practice of portraying rulers in garden is of mid- eighteenth century Guler convention, which influenced the Basohli (Randhawa, 1965, figs. 6, 8, 9) and Chamba portraits after the extension of Guler style through migrating Guler painters in these states.



Figure 2 Raja Amrit Pal (Reigned 1757-1776) of Basohli, by Ranjha, (Source: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, no. M.80.223.1)

Some portraits of another series were shared between Lahore (Aijazuddin, 1977, Guler, 56- 58, figs. 47 (i- vii)) and Chandigarh Museums during partition of the country. The portraits are inscribed in *Gurmukhi*, *Devanagari* and Persian (figs. 3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 13). The representations of Guru Amar Das, Guru Hargobind and Guru Tegh Bahadur are based on popular iconographies (Aijazuddin, 1977, Guler, 57, figs. 47 (iii, v, vii)), while others are grounded on portraitist's fancies or *dhyanas*, as several stories were prevalent in the hills about artists' cunning for rendering their immortals (Goswamy, 1961, 39). The painter, however, had also his choice in painting pictures from his peculiar imaginings and to his own perception. These were designed for presentation to the Raja on special occurrences as *nazars* and ordinarily received recompenses (Goswamy, 1961, 41).

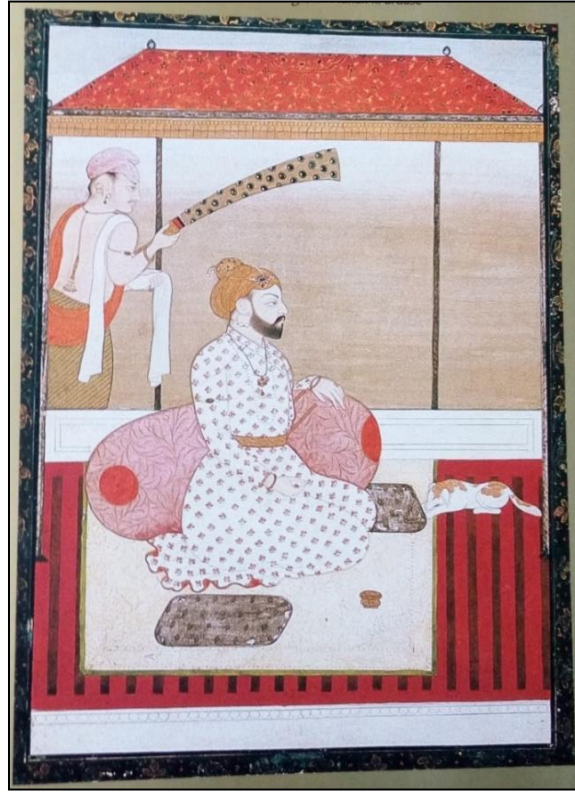


Figure 3 Guru Angad, Lahore Museum, acc. no. F- 40, (Publ. Goswamy, 1980)

Guru Angad (fig. 3) was contemporary of Emperor Humayun and also met him in 1540. Different from mid- sixteenth century attires, Guru Angad is portrayed in long- length *jama* and short waist- band. Forty- seven years (1504- 1552) aged Guru Angad's facial features (fig. 3) are based on young Raja Raj Singh of Chamba (1764- 1794) (figs. 4, 5) and painter portrayed him in small black beard, round turban, pierced ears along with attendant of Sikh style. Sikh style attendant also represented in pierced ears. The style of robes (figs. 3, 4) is also similar. The portraits of Chamba ruler (figs. 4, 5) are ascribed by Khandalavala to the painter Ranjha (Khandalavala, 1982, endnote on 44, pl. M. Also Archer, 1973, Vol. II, Chamba, pl. 40. Ohri, 1998, 10). But his elder brother Nikka was also working with similar elegance (Archer, 1973, Vol. I, 87. Archer, 1973, Vol. II, Chamba, pl. 39 for style of Nikka), applying similar idioms.



Figure 4 Young Raja Raj Singh watching dance, by Ranjha, 1772, Gujarat Museum Society, N.C. Mehta Gallery, Ahmedabad, (Publ. Ohri, 1998, fig. 1)



Figure 5 Young Raja Raj Singh of Chamba, 1780, (Publ. Archer, 1973, Vol. II, Chamba, pl. 40)

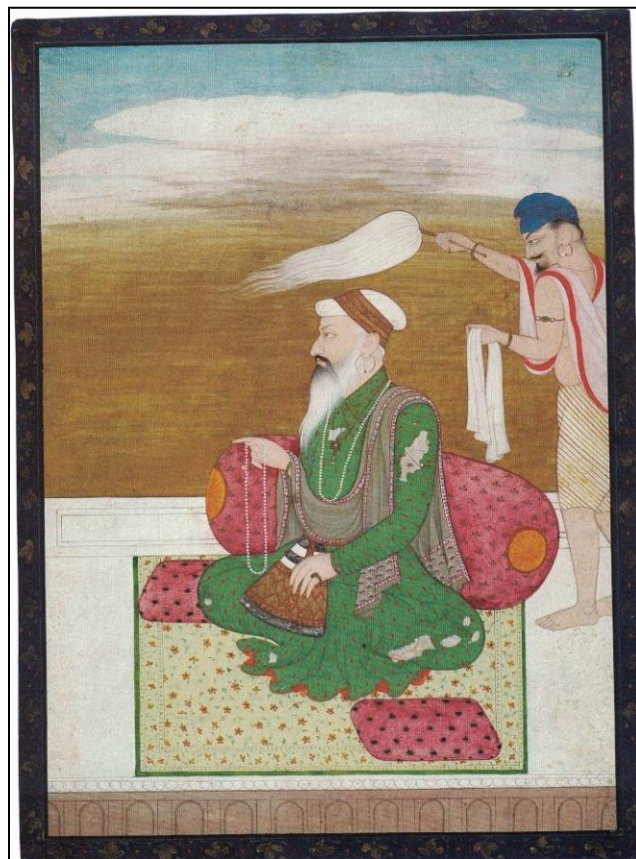


Figure 6 Guru Ram Das, (Courtesy: Chandigarh Museum, acc. no. F- 42)

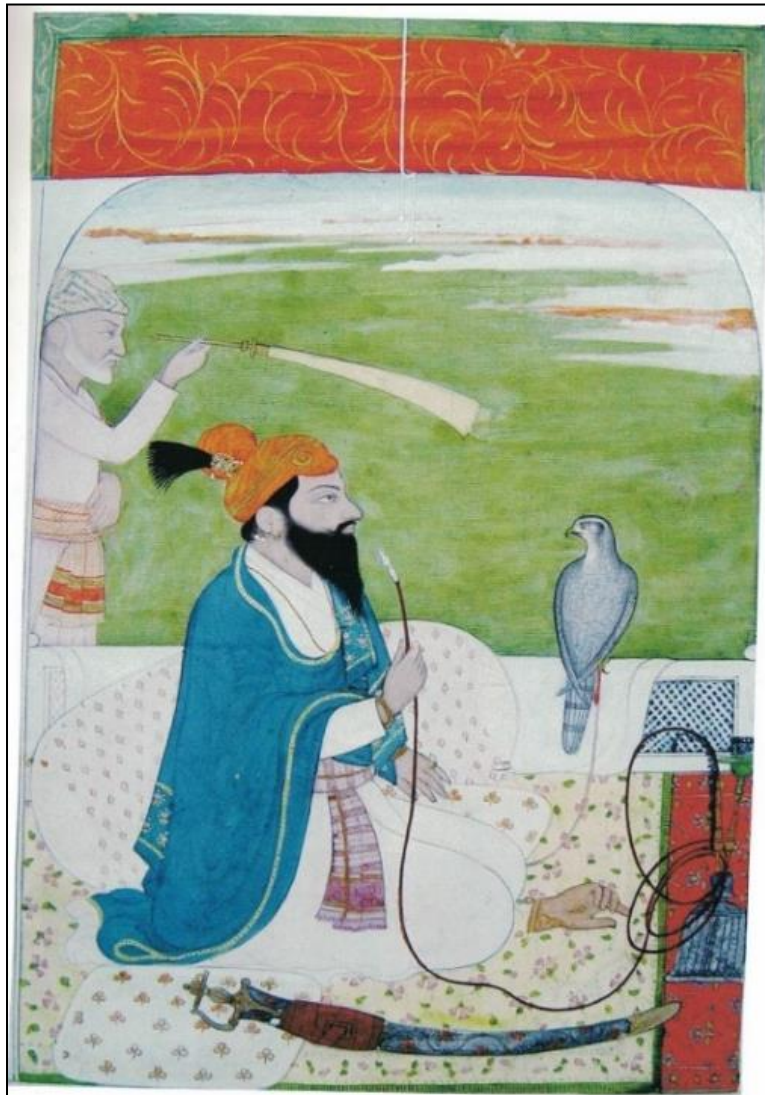


Figure 7 Raja Raj Singh of Chamba, (Source: Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, acc. no. 08.325.17)

Guru Ram Das (1574-1581) (fig. 6) met Emperor Akbar to interpret the values of Sikhism at the Agra court (Singh, 1967, 27), who bestowed Guru Ram Das with a robe of honour (Jagdev, 1995, 56). Guru Ram Das had good knowledge of 'gach' (a plaster prepared by gypsum), a synonym of wall- decorations, which is correspondingly reflected in his *bani* (hymns), while the term is used in metaphysical sense.

ਗੜ ਮੰਦਰ ਗਚ ਗੀਰੀਆ ਿਕਛੁ ਸਾਥਿ ਨ ਜਾਈ, (ਮਃ ੪) (SGGS, 1246).

garh mandar gach geereeya kichu sath na jaai

During Guru Ram Das, Akbari period *atpati topi*, *chaakdar jama* and long waist- band were fashioned (Khandalavala, 1958, 288) in the country, but artist portrayed Guru Ram Das (fig. 6) in long- length *jama* and band- turban. Likeness of Guru Ram Das is clearly influenced by matured Chamba ruler Raja Raj Singh (fig. 7), ascribed to the painter Ranjha by Sharma (Sharma, 2008, fig. 26), but Mittal attributed the same portrait to the painter Nikka (Mittal, 1962, fig. 19). Guru Ram Das was of forty- six years old, but he is portrayed with white heavy bearded face, while in the portrait of Raja Raj Singh, he is in similar style beard of black coloured. *Huqqa* holding by Chamba ruler (fig. 7) is replaced by *simarni* (rosary) for the *darshan* of Guru (fig. 6). The style of wearing wrap is also alike. Attendant of Guru is different from the attendant of Raja Raj Singh, but the idioms of flat background of green & brown, white clouds on dull blue sky and flowery herbs applied in backgrounds of Chamba royal portraits were continuous idioms of Sikh portraits (fig. 8). Yellow coloured carpet with floral pattern & border (figs. 4, 6- 9) as well striped patterned carpet (figs. 3, 10) and flower- gardens are common idioms of Basohli (figs. 1, 2), Chamba (fig. 12) and Sikh paintings.

Guru Arjun was contemporary of Akbar and Jahangir. During Guru Arjun, Akbari period *atpati topi*, *chaakdar jama* and long waist- band as well as Jahangiri style short waist- band with floral patterns, *gherdar jama* and a different type of turban were in fashion. In actual, Guru Hargobind adopted the fashion of Jahangiri turban (Singh and Singh, 2012, 115), pronouncing his purpose of wearing arms, abandoning the *seli*, and *topi* (symbols of a *fakir*) (Singh, 1914, Vol. 1,126). Guru Arjun got the foundation of *Akal Takhat* laid by Mian Meer in 1588. A portrait of Mian Meer and Mulla Shah meeting with Dara Shikoh exists (Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, acc. no. S1986.432) of circa 1640, and Mian Meer is shown in simple band- turban, which is substantiation of fashion in Punjab. However, the *darshan* of Guru Arjun (fig. 8) is also influenced by Raja Raj Singh of Chamba (fig. 7). Guru Arjun was of forty- three years and painter rendered him with small bearded face, pierced ears, adjusting the long beard and turban of Raj Singh. Guru Arjun installed the *Adi Granth* in *Akal Takhat*, Amritsar and his *darbar* was full of *bhaktas*, saints and *bhatts*. Guler artist portrayed him with scripture conveyed with an ascetic.

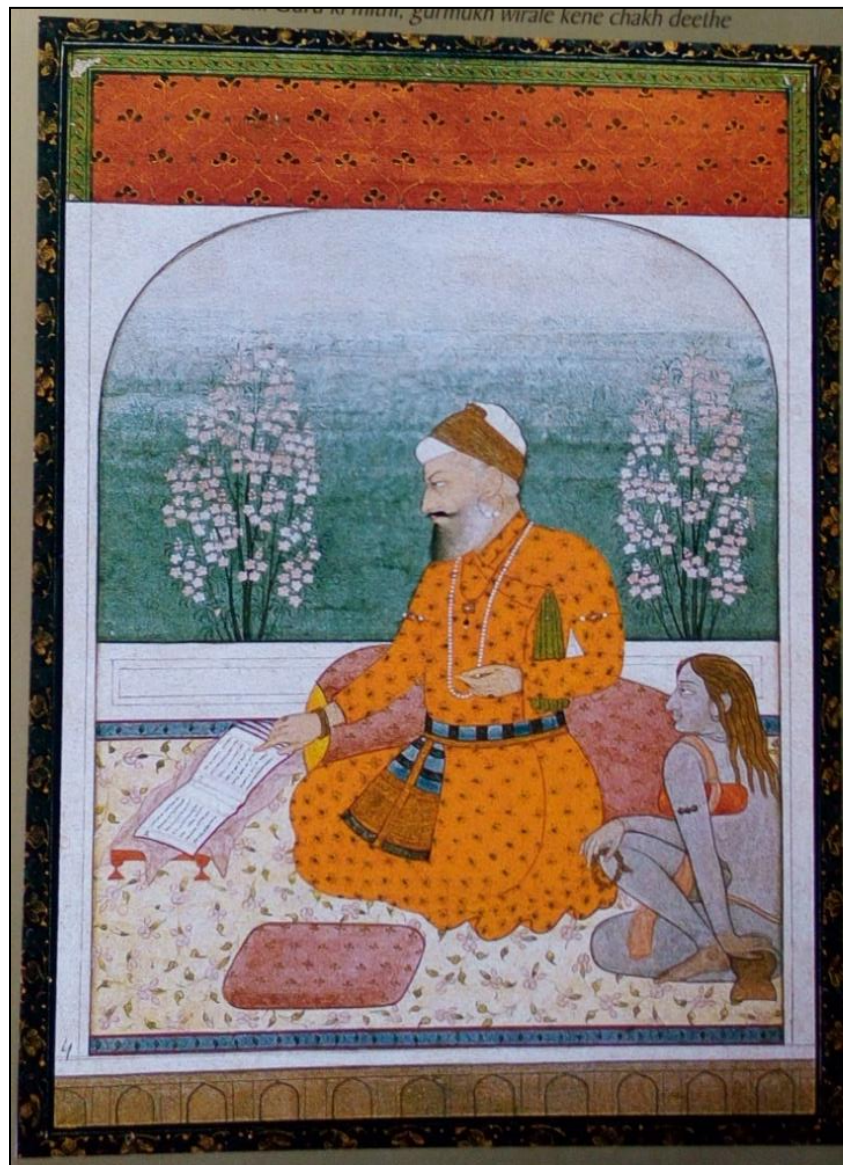


Figure 8 Guru Arjun, Lahore Museum, acc. no. F- 43, (Publ. Goswamy, 1980)

Seven years old Guru Har Krishan's facial features (fig. 9) are based on young Raja Vijay Pal of Basohli (fig. 10) and he is portrayed as an adult, which shows the lack of knowledge of artist about Sikh subject. Guru Har Krishan is portrayed in small conical turban and waist- band of Sikh style, fashioned in early nineteenth century Sikhs of Lahore, which impressed the fashion of whole Punjab hills. Cotton stuff waist- bands of checkered patterned prevalent among Sikh *misaldars*, became extinct during first decade of nineteenth century, replaced by royal Sikh style broad waist- bands (*kamarband*), covering the bums (figs. 9, 10, 12). The fashion was followed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh along with his intimates.

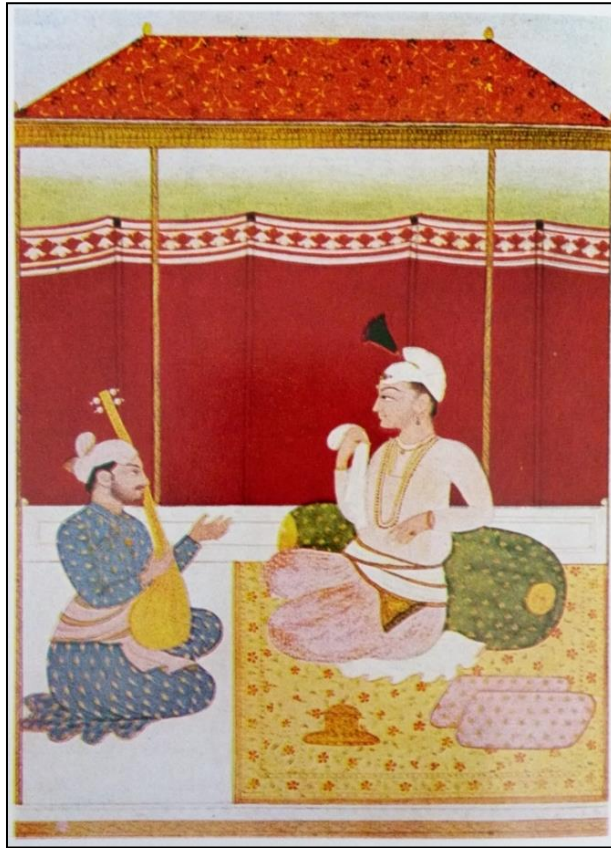


Figure 9 Guru Har Krishan, (Publ. Goswamy, 1980)

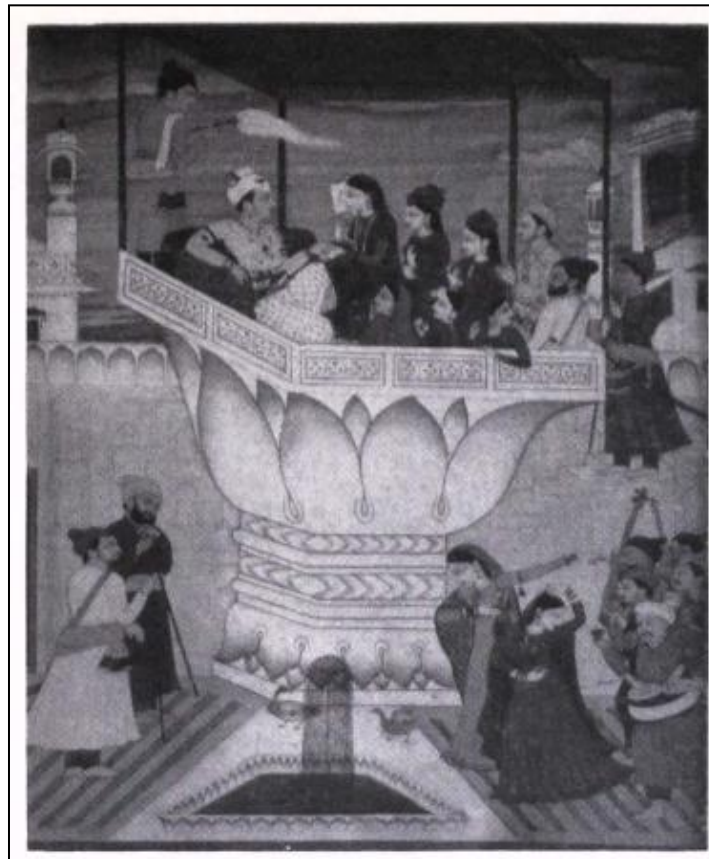


Figure 10 Young Raja Vijay Pal of Basohli, (Publ. Randhawa, 1968, fig. 1. Archer, 1973, Vol. II, Basohli, pl. 29)



Figure 11 Guru Har Rai, 1st quarter of 19th century, (Source: Chandigarh Museum, acc. no. F- 45)

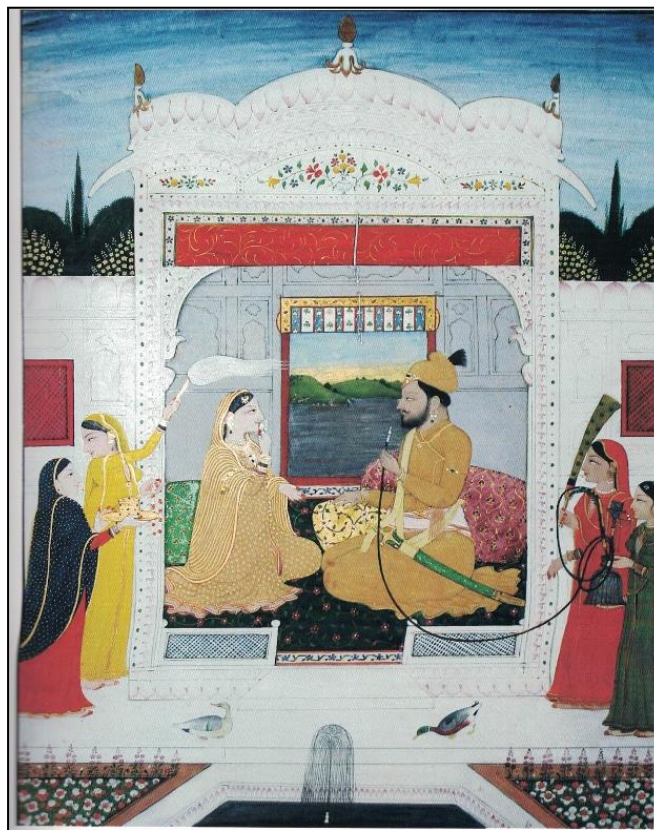


Figure 12 Raja Jit Singh of Chamba (1794- 1808), (Source: Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, acc. no. 00.685.17), by Chhajju

Guru Har Rai's iconography (fig. 11) is enthused by Raja Jit Singh of Chamba (fig. 12). Both, Mittal (Mittal, 1962, fig. 12) and Sharma ascribed the portrait of Raja Jit Singh to the painter Chhajju; third son of Nikka (Sharma, 2008, fig. 34). Thirty- one years old Guru Har Rai forced the artist to apply the facial features of a young ruler and Raja Jit Singh of Chamba (1794- 1808) in small conical turban of Sikh style was an ideal for the artist.

Equestrian portrait of Guru Gobind Singh (fig. 13) reminds the face of Nala from *Nala Damayanti* series of Ranjha of Basohli (Goswamy, 2015, pl. 8). Patterns used for the saddle cloth of Guru, also goes back to Raja Govardhan Chand (Chandigarh Museum, acc. no. 190) and also often appear in *Nala Damayanti* series (Goswamy, 2015, pl. 27). The models of Guler, Basohli and Chamba were the ideals for the artists, who were active in these states and patronized later under Sikhs, and it was common to reserve likenesses of rulers in painters' family collections, who applied them for Sikh Gurus after sudden, occasional and royal patronage granted by the Sikhs.

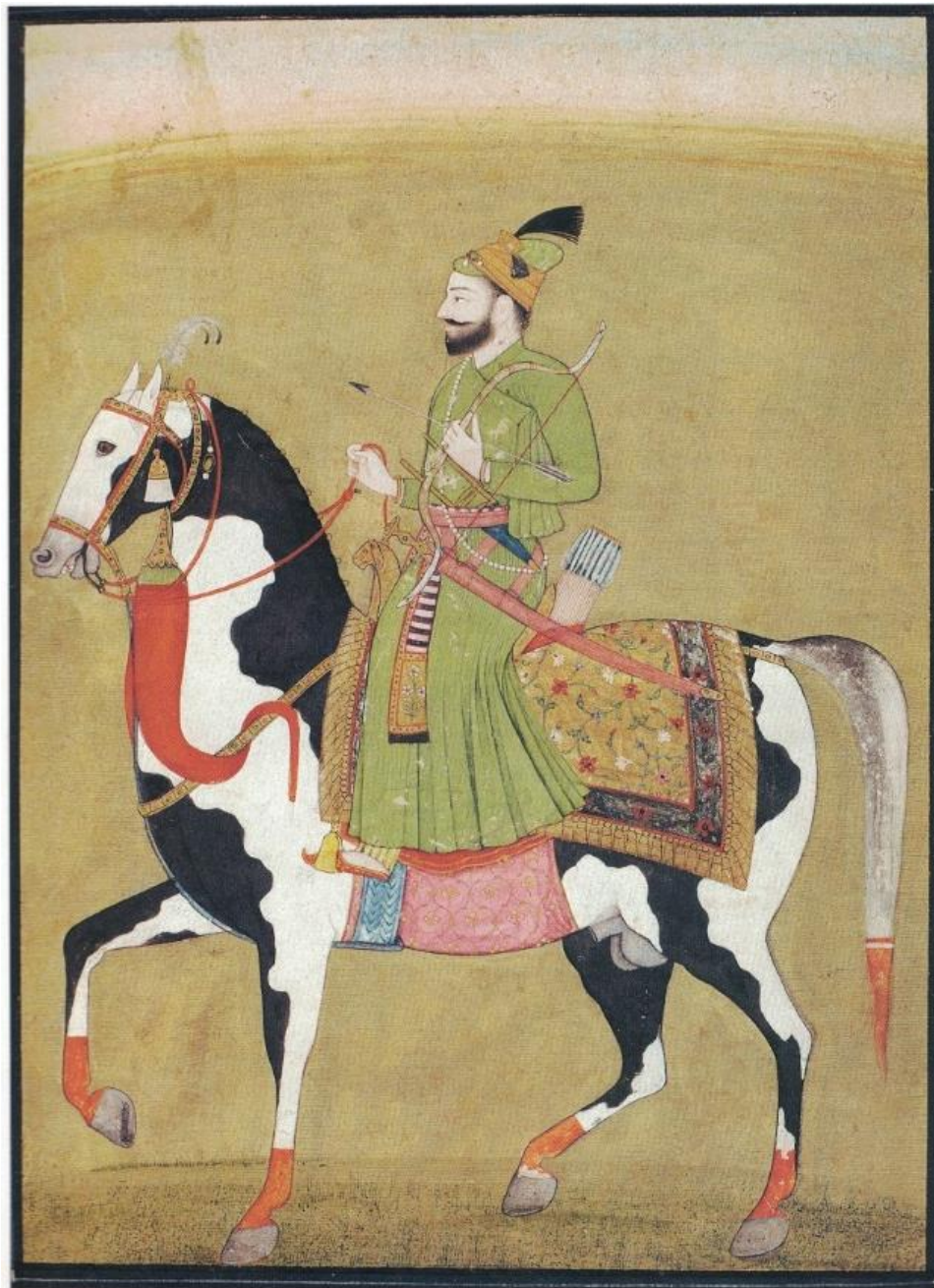


Figure 13 Guru Gobind Singh, (Source: Chandigarh Museum, acc. no. F- 48)

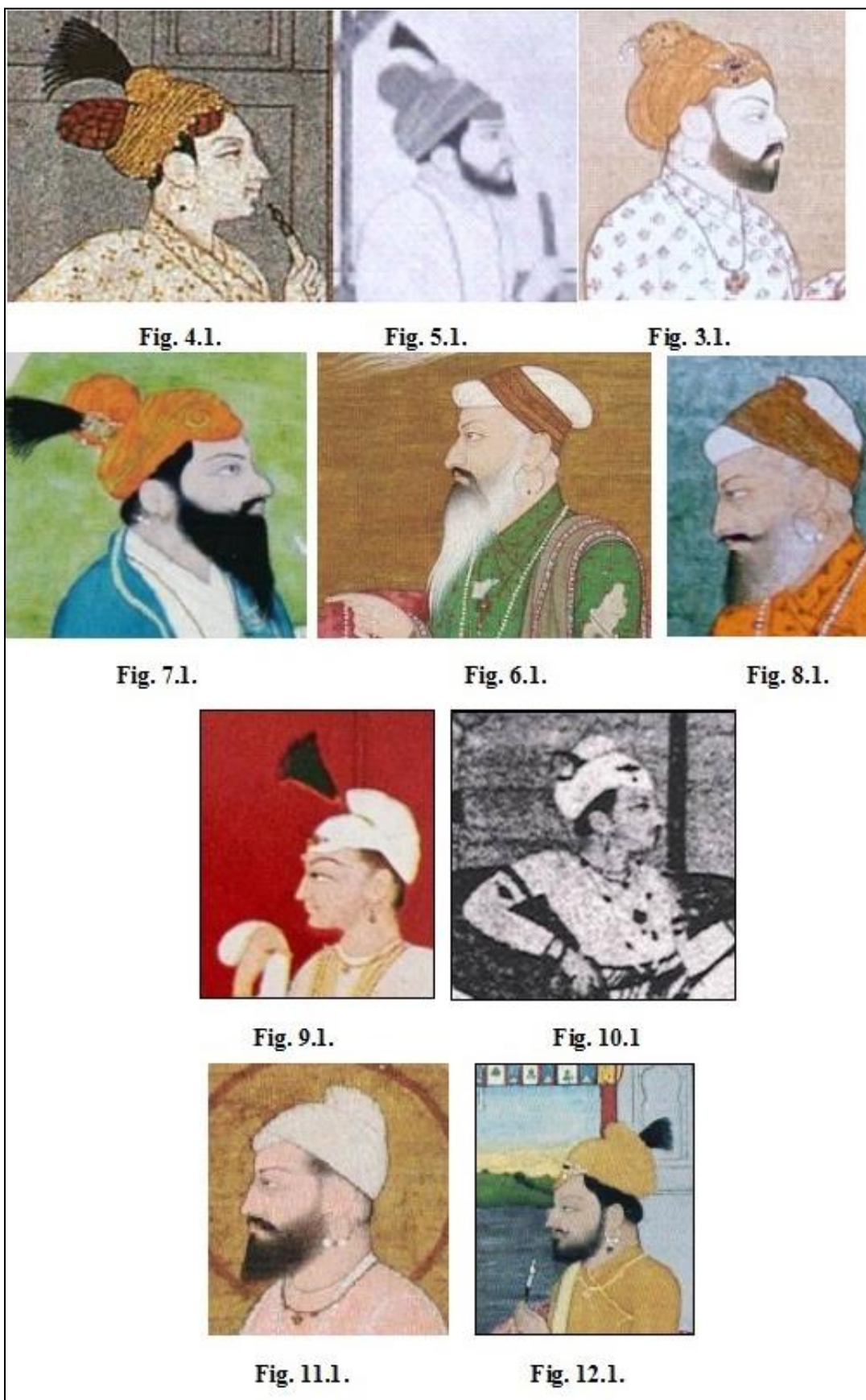
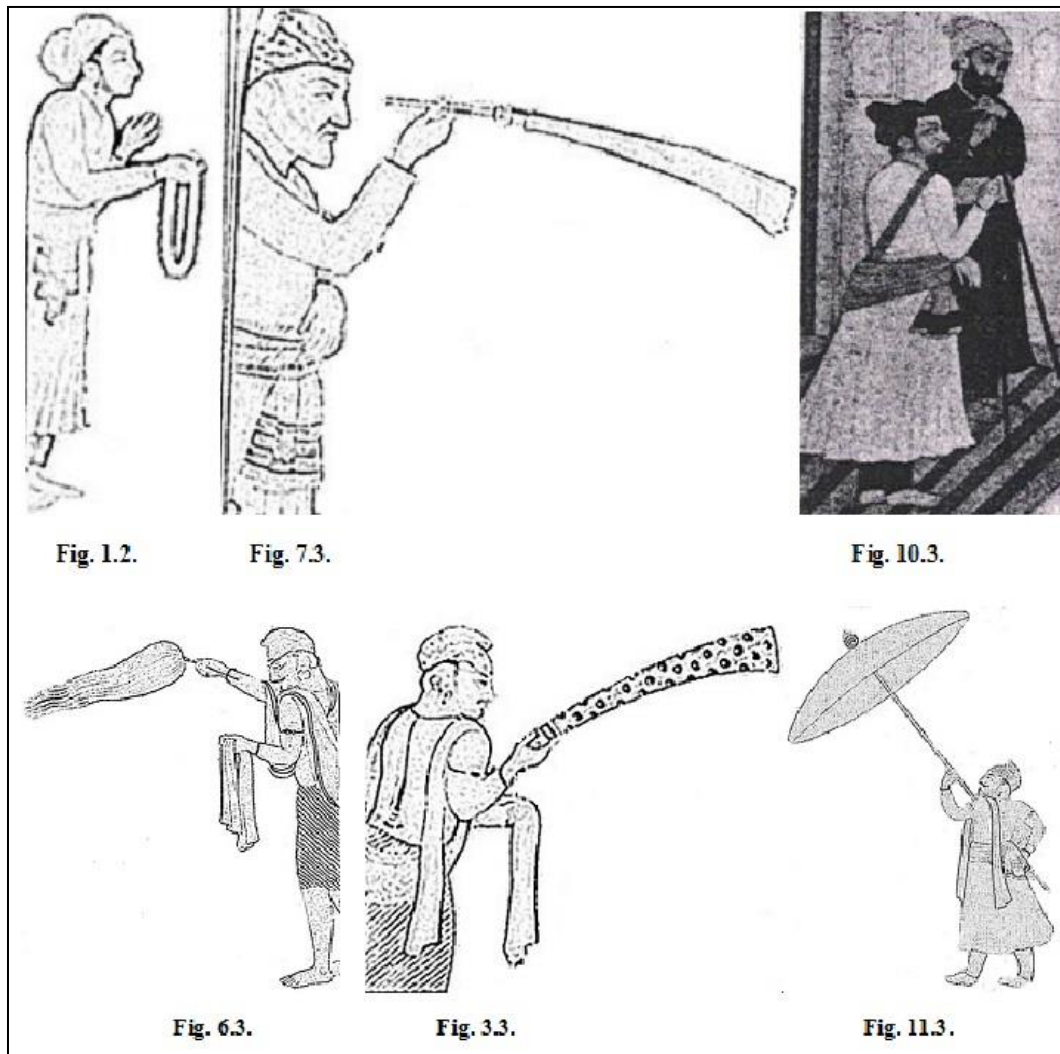
Table 1 Facial features of Rajput Rulers and Sikh Gurus

Table 2 Stances of Rajput Rulers and Sikh Gurus

Samples of likenesses of Guru Hargobind were reserved amid the Sikh devotees and they circulated them among artists for copying. Likenesses for Guru Har Rai were also available in some areas but artists experimented for the portrait of Guru Har Rai along with other likenesses. Portraits of Guru Ram Das (fig. 6) and Guru Gobind Singh (fig. 13) are ascribed by Goswamy to the 1800 A.D., while portrayal of Guru Har Rai is ascribed to first quarter of nineteenth century (fig. 11) (Goswamy and Smith, 2006, 134- 135, 144- 147). The conventions applied for Sikh Gurus came from the mid- eighteenth century Guler, Chamba and Basohli Schools (tables. 1, 2), but attendants in Sikh style turban (table. 3, figs. 3.3, 6.3, 11.3) indicate the fashion of early nineteenth century. Thus, portrait series from the collection of Sardar Mohan Singh (Archer, 1966, figs. 1- 6) was painted earlier, grounded on imaginations, but later, with some alterations in the style of attendants from Rajput to Sikh appearance, along with adopting of facial features of Chamba and Basohli rulers, series of Lahore and Chandigarh Museums was emerged in same atelier of family painters.

Table 3 Adjustment of Rajput Conventions in Sikh Portraits

3. ARTISTS AND PATRONAGE

Raja Raj Singh of Chamba was a contemporary of Prakash Chand of Guler (A.D. 1773- 1790) who had a wife from Chamba. Cultural interactions between Guler and Chamba led to the development of painting in Chamba. Goswamy's study throws light on the settlement records of Nikka's family in 1780 at Rajol in the *taluka* of Rihlu during Raja Raj Singh of Chamba after granting the land by him before his death in 1794. According to Goswamy, only family of Nikka, third son of the artist Nainsukh, initially came to Rajol and was given lands by Raja Raj Singh (Goswamy, 1964, 17) and Archer supports the inferences of Goswamy (Archer, 1973, Vol. I, 76, 86. Archer, 1973, Vol. II, Chamba, pl. 37), and rejects the conclusions of Khandalavala (Khandalavala, 1982, 43-45) and Ohri, that Nikka along with his younger brother Ranjha jointly worked under Raja Raj Singh of Chamba (Ohri, 1998, 12). Ranjha and Nikka both worked for Guler rulers Govardhan Chand (1741-1773) (Archer, 1973, Vol. I, 128) and Prakash Chand (Khandalavala, 1982, 99, fig. 23) and then for Raja Raj Singh of Chamba (1764- 1794). Ranjha worked for Raja Raj Singh of Chamba at least for ten years (Khandalavala, 1982, 44). Nainsukh was employed in the service of Raja Amrit Pal of Basohli after the death of Raja Balwant Singh of Jasrota at least from the year 1763 onwards and his fourth son Ranjha continued to work in Basohli till 1827 (Goswamy, 2015, 75-77). Goswamy ascribed the painter Ranjha, responsible for the painted *Nala Damayanti* series of Karan Singh collection between 1790 and 1800 on the grounds of style (Goswamy, 2015, 79- 80). Before the employment in Basohli, Ranjha, also worked for Raja Raj Singh of Chamba for a considerable period of time (Ohri, 1998, 12) and Raja Raj Singh had good relations with Sikh *misaldars*. Although, the relations of Chamba state with Sikhs were good from the beginning of eighteenth century. Raja Raj Singh of Chamba invaded Basohli in 1782 (Hutchison and Vogel, 1933, Vol. II, 609) and Jassa Singh Ramgarhia helped him in this conquest.

Ohri and Khandalavala focused the inscriptions of the paintings of Chamba. A painting at Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba by Attra, a great-grandson of Nainsukh, is inscribed with the name of seven Guler artists, employed at Chamba court, residing in Rihlu. These

were Ranjha, Narena (Nainsukh), Nikka, Godhu, Chhajju, Attra and Saudagar (Ohri, 1998, 12). Raja Raj Singh came up the *gaddi* of Chamba in 1764 at the age of nine. He had expanded ample influence through prosperity in his state within few years. The invincible persona of Raj Singh is distinguished from a number of encounters he fought. Due to the huge number of paintings from Chamba, currently in the Bhuri Singh Museum and Chandigarh Museum, it gives the impression that Ranjha also employed at Chamba court for a substantial period of time.

With the invasion of Kangra hills, Maharaja Ranjit Singh became the sovereign of the hilly areas where these artists' families were patronized by Raja Raj Singh. Nikka and Ranjha, because both worked in a similar style, also, they erudite their art of miniature painting, in accordance with the practice of the period, from their father Nainsukh and probably their uncle Manaku, the two utmost distinguished artists of the Guier style. Raja Raj Singh also granted the lands to Chhajju and he was active until early nineteenth century along with his brothers in Chamba (Sharma, 2008, 132).

After the annexation of hill states by Sikh Maharaja, some documents related to the grants of land, offered to the painters also came through by the constant efforts of Goswamy. The painters who find direct mention in these documents were Nikka, his three sons Harkhu, Gokal and Chhajju, Damodar, son of Gokal, and Saudagar son of Chhajju, all belong to the family of Guler (Goswamy, 1999, 2). After the death of Chamba ruler Jit Singh (1794- 1808), Chamba state became the subject to Lahore, but remained free due to difficult character of the country and Nathu wazir of Chamba was favourite of Sikh Maharaja, but in 1821 Rihlu came under the Sikh governor Desa Singh Majithia (Hutchison and Vogel, 1933, Vol. I, 321- 323). The villages, in which painters survived, also came under Sikh establishments, where Nikka had caught the eye of Sardar Budh Singh Sandhanwalia, who was; through affiliation and position, close to the Sikh Maharaja. It is also not implausible that Nikka served both the Sandhanwalias and Ranjit Singh while he was engaged. Chhajju, Nikka's son was also worked for Wasava Singh, father of Ajit Singh Sandhanwalia. The land granted to Nikka by Sardar Budh Singh was before A.D. 1825, which evidenced his employment under Sardar Budh Singh Sandhanwalia and Maharaja Ranjit Singh till 1825 and the grant was issued at Rihlu in Chamba territory, where Nikka was settled by Raja Raj Singh (Goswamy, 1999, 11, 13- 16). Kang also noted that, probably, Gokal and Chhajju, the Guler painters, also worked on the wall paintings of *haveli* Raja Sansi; Amritsar, in the employ of the Sandhanwalia Sardars (Kang, 1988, 51).

4. CONCLUSION

In this series, likenesses of Basohli and Chamba rulers from mid of eighteenth century till early nineteenth century inspired the *darshan* of Guru Angad, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjun, Guru Har Krishan and Guru Har Rai, while likenesses of Guru Amar Das, Guru Hargobind and Guru Tegh Bahadur are rendered on conventions, popular in Punjab plains, which concludes that painters had the copies of their conventional likenesses in their collections, but *darshan* of early Gurus were not approached by them. And sudden substitution of sponsorship forced them to adjust the likenesses of their Rajput patrons for Sikh legendry portrayals. Existence of Guler Basohli and Chamba idioms force to consider the participation of Ranjha, his elder brother Nikka and his third son Chhajju in this series for either Maharaja Ranjit Singh or Sandhanwalias. Impression of royal Sikh life style in the form of Sikh attendants, wearing small conical turban, breeches and holding umbrella support the emergence of series in early nineteenth century.

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