

THE CONTRIBUTION OF HIMALAYAN ART IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SIKH SCHOOL OF ART

ANALYSES ON SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS FACTORS

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Abstract: The paper investigates the relationship and influences of the *Pahari* art of the Himalaya region of the northern part of India to another region with complete distinct cultural orientation, religious preferences and geographical conditions; The Punjab plain or the Sikh state. The objective of the study is to analyze the various circumstances and situation that compelled the artists from the Himalayan region to migrate to Punjab plains, which influenced and laid the foundation of the Sikh school of arts in Punjab plain. The paper will elaborately discuss important contribution of the Art of the Himalaya to the Art and Culture of Punjab. Beside that paper will identify the various Art school developed under the Rajput in the *Pahari* region and how various events led to the subjugation of the Himalaya region (Punjab hills) by the Sikhs in the early nineteenth century. The Sikh dominated the hill region, they became supreme everywhere and also the subjects of the Himalayan art or the *Pahari* art changed considerably. The research will be conducted on the basis of analyses of various miniature work (paintings) done under the Rajput at *Pahari* regions, then after the annexation of *Pahari* region, under the Sikhs patrons at *Pahari* region and finally the work done for the Sikh patron at Punjab plains by the itinerants *Pahari* Artist. All the research will be historical based, mostly covering the Art of the Himalaya or the *Pahari* Art done in the 16th to 19th century, using methodology of gathering information from various concerned libraries, research papers, journals, internet. And objective of the research is to find out that considerable change in the works executed by itinerants *Pahari* artist under the patronage of the Sikh rulers in Punjab hills as well as Punjab plains. How the splendid, richly colored and vigorous representation of the myths and legends in the Kangra painting of Himalaya region was replaced by a formalist pattern, in which the figures, trees and atmosphere were treated, and conventional color schemes used without achieving that vigor and intensity vested in the deep emotions of the *Pahari* artist. Discussion was conducted with other scholars to be sure in case the research was done correctly and whether any further development should be made in the research paper. The research paper will conclude on the formation of Sikh school of arts in Punjab plains with deep influences from the Art of the Himalaya.

Index terms - Himalayan art, Pahari art, Sikh art, Sikh school of art, migration

INTRODUCTION

Miniature painting of the Himalaya that prevailed in *Pahari* region is one of the largest schools of painting, and also they were neighboring hill states of Punjab. Each of the regions has distinct style of their own-Basholi, Guler, Kangra, Chamba, Nurpur, Gharwal, Mandi and few other small schools run by family workshop of painters who contributed to these marvelous schools of Indian art. The works are known for their utmost sensitivity, liveliness and romanticism, devotional and free from pretence, dates from the seventeenth century and completes in eighteenth century. A huge number of miniatures of different styles and themes were executed in these schools of art, collectively called the *Pahari* School of art. The *Pahari* School is so great and huge, has a unique identity of its own in the history of Indian art. Because of its distinctive style this chapter of Himalayan art famously termed as 'Pahari kalam' has its own space in the Indian art history and is treated separately from the paintings of the Sikh School of Art, but it's necessary to know the links and sharing between these two schools. So if we want to understand and have an insight on the formation of Sikh school of

art, it's impossible without the thorough understanding of the development of painting in the influential school of Pahari art. While the *Janam Sakhi* manuscripts paintings were inspired from the prevailing Sufi *cult*, the art of Sikh miniature painting draws its inspiration from the great tradition of the Pahari School of arts from Himalayan region.

This artistic movement in Punjab plains was the culmination of the works and progress of preceding three centuries and was contemporary to the great Pahari School of art, and progress on the foundation laid by the great Himalayan or Pahari style progressed further to form Sikh school of arts in late nineteenth century. Painting of Kangra in Pahari region became world renowned for their graceful depiction of feminine charm with beautiful soft rendering of facial features. The main focus of Pahari painting is the erotic sentiment (*shringar*) and also depiction of the life style of the society of contemporary time. Love stories of Radha and Krishna were the main centre of interest, derived from the *Bhakti* cult prevailing during the period. The Kangra *kalam* is characterized by the tenderness and delicacy of its female types and generally soft coloring, though this was not always the case. Each hill state had its own idiom of the Kangra *Kalam*. Men and women seem to move in another world, a far-away world from reality, where love reigns supreme ever remembering the legend of the blue god. The hill river becomes the Jamuna, a hill prince is Krishna, a hill princess is Radha, and the hill forests become the groves and woodlands of Vrndavan.¹ Krishna represents perfection of beauty and Radha stands for perfect love.² The artists of Kangra got inspired from the various *bhakti* cults like *vaishnavism*, *shaivism*, *shaktism*. The miniatures painting done under the Rajput of the hills represent Hindu mythology themes and depicts Hindu deities like Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh and some other related Hindu deities and *Devis*. According to *Vaishnavism* Hindu gods lord Krishna and lord Rama are believed to be incarnation of Vishnu; and both of these incarnations were dominantly used in the pictorial elements of the Kangra paintings. As per Hindu mythology *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Mahesh* together were regarded as the symbol of creator, preserver and destroyer. Krishna in Kangra miniatures is depicted as a blue god of the hill in a dreamlike and mystic world romancing with his sacred love *Radha*. The divine romance is beautifully depicted with natural symbolic idioms. Krishna is the *Nayak* or hero and Radha is *Nayika* in the paintings, both represent the ideal beauty and perfection in love.

It's remarkable of the Kangra painter in their depiction of facial expression, gestures and movement of the limbs are amazingly in rhythm with the background of forest, various plants, Birds, animals, mountains tend to participate in the divine love and pleasure. Lord *Krishna* was also depicted occasionally with his mother *Yashoda*, father *Nand*, and his friend *Sudama* narrating stories related to various miraculous endeavors by lord Krishna. The color schemes of all the paintings are in bright warm colors which symbolize purity and divinity, lines are lyrical and rhythmic. All the pure colors; Red, Yellow, Blue, Green and saffron are extensively used in depiction of these sacred and philosophical paintings.

Besides the divine romance the icon of *Shakti*; goddess *Durga*; consort of Shiva and her nine incarnations and dramatic scenes of *Raudra* or *Ugra Devi*'s battles with demons or *Asura* is the represent the supremacy and the glorification of the feminine as Hindus assume triumph of womanly will power over masculine egos and ills. Worship of Devi by other divinities after glorious tasks are very expressive visuals painted by Kangra artists. Kangra art is fully inspired by Hindu mythology and medieval literature, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, *Devi Mahatamay*, *Markandey Purana* etc., but mostly by *Krishnaism* because *Vaishnavism* was the principal religion in Hill states during 18th to 19th century.³

¹ Karl Khandalawala, The development of style in Indian Painting, Heras Institute of Indian History and Culture, 1974, S B N-33390 0456, pg. 95-96

² Banerjee P., The Blue God, Lalit Kala Akademi, India, 1981, pg. no. 11

³ Kaur Gurdeep/ Pahari and Sikh miniature paintings: a comparative study July 16, 2015, The Achievers Journal, Lpu

The invasion of the Gurkhas in 1805-1812, weakened the Pahari aristocracy but annexation by the Sikhs in 1811 attracted Pahari artists to the Sikh patronage under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, which laid and end to the Pahari splendor and laid the pavements of possibilities for the formation of art that can be called as Sikh art. Number of artists migrated from hills to Punjab plains in search of new patrons, which they found in powerful nobles like Sandhanwalia brothers, or in the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, under the Sikh empire.

Pahari artists painted according to the need of Rajput chiefs, with mostly religious themes inspired by *Vaishnavism*, *Shaivism*, and *Saktism*, with style that was deeply influenced by the Mughal miniature painting. According to the Hindu mythology Vishnu, Brahma and Mahesh symbolize creator, preserver and destroyer and all other Hindu gods like Krishna, lord Rama are incarnations of Vishnu and Mahesh. Thus these two gods repeatedly depicted on most of the religious themes executed in Pahari *Kalam*, as it was inspired by Vaishnavite themes.

Devotion towards lord Krishna and rise of the Radha Krishna cult during eleventh century inspired poets like Keshavdas, Surdas, Mirabai and Jaidev. Their creations found expression not only in the form of the poems but also in the form of the Pahari miniature paintings as many of these paintings took inspiration from these poetic verses. Love became the main theme of the artists. The earliest known miniature of Pahari School is an illustration of Bhanudatt's *Rasmanjari* by painter Devidas during the reign of Raja Kirpal pal of Basohali. ⁴ This work was produced around 1694 A.D.

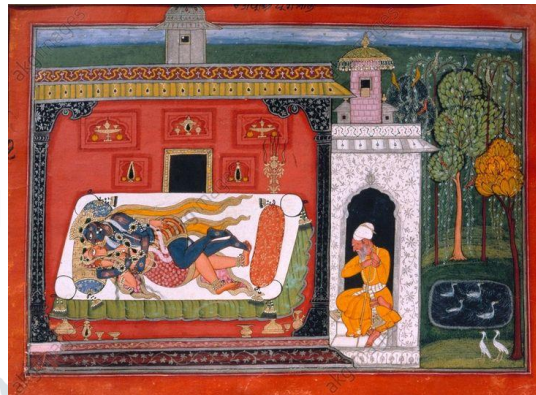


Fig1. Illustration of Bhanudatt's *Rasmanjari* by painter Devidas during the reign of Raja Kirpal pal of Basohali.

After succeeding his father who was the chief of the Sukerchakia misl, powerful misl of Punjab, it was now the reign of Ranjit Singh who was to establish the ever strongest empire of the Sikhs and Sikh capital for Sikh people. With his farsightedness, clever vision and sheer intellect he was able to rule over half century, an atmosphere of peace and tranquility prevailed in his reign. After a strong hold of his empire in Lahore, neighboring hill states were to become an obvious target; Ranjit Singh started expanding his empire to the hilly areas. The hills were invaded by the Gurkhas in beginning of the nineteenth century, defenseless king of the hill requested Ranjit Singh for intervention. Ranjit Singh successfully resisted the Gurkhas and defended the hill territories; with his cleverness and political thinking he subdued the hill aristocracy. Sansar chand of Kangra was replaced by the Sikh monarch Ranjit Singh. Ranjit Singh established his rule over the raja, by installing one of his ministers Desa Singh majithia over him, although hill raja was allowed to keep his state under his rule. Sardar Desa Singh Majithia, who had played a prominent part in this victory, was appointed the qiladar of the Kangra fort as well as the *nazim* (governor) of the Kangra and the adjoining hill states.⁵ Later Guler was captured in 1813 A.D, with growing dominance of Sikh Empire in other hill states, Kangra was also captured in 1828 A.D, and came completely under the Sikh government. With all these political developments of Sikh Empire at hills, Pahari art did not receive any Sikh patronage to an appreciable extent. Only at the middle of the nineteenth century, some interest in Pahari art was shown by the Sikh rulers.

The Rajput rule saw a sudden end in the hill state. The government was now run by the Sikh governors; they now became the tax collector and decision makers. The royal family of Sansar Chand and local influential

⁴ http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/129058/14/08_chapter%203.pdf.

⁵ Punjab District Gazetteers, Kangra District, 1924-25, pg. 74

families were now the subordinates of the Sikhs, however royal family was allowed to live with same freedom and dignity. Both the rulers had a mutual understanding between them, never did they interrupt in the privacy of the other. The governor Desa Singh Majithia with his skills and tactics was able to create a cordial environment between the Sikhs and the Rajput. This healthy relation between the two states proved beneficial for the evolvement of the Sikh school of arts. Earlier phase of the Pahari painting under Sikh patronage at the hills were a continuation of the Pahari style with Sikh themes. It was only after this extended patronage to the Pahari artists; they came down to Lahore and lived at the then capital of Punjab in search of patronage from various influential Sikhs and in the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. They worked here under affluent Sikhs, powerful Sandhanwalia Sikhs, although with some initial difficulties Pahari artist got well adapted to the Sikh supremacy. They molded their style and themes according to the Sikh need, but still except some formal changes it can be seen as the continuation of Pahari art which was seeing a great transformation resulted by the change in political and religious conditions.

The formation of Sikh school of arts owed gratefulness to the kindhearted Sikh governors to the Rajput hill states, their tactfulness, ability and generous behaviors towards the common people of the hills earned them respect and love among the people of the hills. Thus they were able to attract the Pahari painters to work on Sikh subjects, Pahari artists started experimentation with Sikh subjects like portraits of the ten gurus of the Sikhs, portraits of the Sikh governors and began to abandon their reliance of Rajput themes of Rasamanjri and Geetgovind, Vaishnavite and Saivism, image of lord Rama and lord Krishna were replaced by the portraits of the Sikh gurus and Sikh folks.

The cordial relations between the Sikhs and common Pahari people got enhanced when Sikh governor Desa Singh Majithia married hill women. This was evidence of his love for the hills and commoners who were also warmly attached with their Sikh governor. He embraced the hills folks wholeheartedly; he left his fort at Kangra to reside amongst the local people of Guler. He also had son from his Pahari wife, who was named Ranjodh. All these were testimony for the local hill people for building of faith to an alien governor, who although was Sikh but never led the religion interfere in his conduct toward the prevailing Hindu religion. Out of this respect and his love for the people of the hills, Pahari artists never hesitated to work on the Sikh themes.

The miniature paintings of the Sikhs by Guler artists provided a poetic spirit to the Sikh art, same way as they depicted their god and goddesses in Pahari art, but Sikh portraits the representation is very formal and stark, devoid of any romanticism of the Pahari *Kalam*. These sets of portraits of the gurus was a fulfillment of the need of the Sikh community, as every Sikh desired to see how their gurus in actual look like, it was kind of curiosity which make these work important in context of the Sikh art. Also it's testifying the fact the Pahari artists by now adopted the Sikh themes for their works, and did lot of experimentation on the Sikh subjects to enrich it with great sensibilities. The Mughal model was adopted for the portraiture, which also influences the later work done in Punjab plains.

Most of these miniatures were created at the family workshop of most gifted of the Pahari artists: the family of Pandit Seu of Guler. The credit for the evolution of various styles of the Pahari art goes to the generations of this family. Pandit seu had two sons; elder one was Manaku and the younger was Nainsukh. These two names of extraordinary talent were responsible for the execution of great master pieces of the Pahari art. They worked on various religious themes related to Vaishnavism, Shivaism of Hindu cult and also on Sikh themes after the annexation of Guler and Kangra by the Sikhs. Various schools of Pahari art such as Guler, Chamba, Nurpur, Gharwal, Mandi, Basholi came into existence with the contribution of these two artists of extra ordinary talent. They worked in the court of Raja Sansar Chand and later for Maharaja Ranjit Singh; both the influential rulers were the great patrons of arts and had a great aesthetic sense. However both possessed different taste in matter of choice of themes and style of work, Sikh monarch was more interested in the art of portraiture, like early Mughal he appreciated the realism instead of religious pictures. The skilled artist of Seu-Nansukh family and further generation of family quickly adapted to the political and social changes, contributed greatly to each of the school in which they were associated.

Artist has used the broad iconography associated with Sikh gurus in execution of these portraits, these icons or symbols are very important in recognition of particular Gurus that followed the first guru, Nanak. This iconography is better to be termed lakshanas, lakshanas is a Gurmukhi term referred in ancient texts translation,

which means cognizable sign. Gurus that succeeded the first Guru Nanak' possess some cognizable sign or lakshanas, which made the depiction of particular guru with clarity. These unique identities or signs are carefully focused in the painting of the gurus, to provide each guru with certain recognition that can establish clarity in the viewer's mind at first glance. For instance, sixth guru of the Sikhs, Guru Har Gobind was the one, who gave the concept of *Miri* and *Piri* to his followers. He carried two swords symbolizing secular power and spiritual authority. In most of the paintings of Guru Har Gobind, he is shown with one gloved hand and a resting falcon, symbol of lordship. Next guru with these cognizable sign was the child guru, Guru Har Krishna; is always shown as a young boy, in these sets of painting, for he was just eight year of age when he died. And then the last and most influential guru of the Sikhs Guru Gobind Singh was always shown as warrior or gladiator, savior of many. He is often represented while riding a *neela ghoda*, as he was famous for his blue colored horse, he was also referred as "*neelay ghode wala*" (one with blue horse) in many of historical texts. However guru was always shown with his horse names 'neela' but the blue color of the horse never appears in these sets of paintings. With these lakshanas, he always was shown carrying bow and arrows, wearing an aigrette, a falcon resting on one hand, a sword around his waist. This may be derived from some of the epithets associated with him, *kalgidhar patshah* (lord wearing an aigrette), *Baazan wala* (one with a falcon) and *neelay ghode wala* (who rides a blue horse). All other Gurus: Angad the second, Amardas third; Ram Das, the fourth; Arjan dev, the fifth, Har Rai, the seventh and Teg Bahadur the ninth appear in these sets of paintings, however in absence of particular sign or iconography or *lakshanas* of these gurus, make it difficult for the viewer to distinguish particular Guru from the rest.

All these pictures painted in the seu-nainsukh family of Guler are more than local studies of Sikh outsider and narrates the Sikh governor's kind nature and his closeness and affability with local Rajput masses. It was only because the Rajput masses and the Guler artist felt estranged that they could not communicate with Sikh rulers with confidence. Before the Sikh rule in Guler, the artist were intended only towards the Rajput order, they were skilled in executing the Rajput subject, they interpreted Rajput images and were hardly aware of the Punjabi culture. But after Sikh rule Guler art mingled with Sikh themes; testify the artist's closeness to the Sikh rulers and also the kind and generous nature of the Sikh governors towards the Guler artists. Guler artists could feel the ease in their company. Therefore the Sikh gurus and Sikh ruler-administrator replaced the Rajput kings and administrators and this embarked the beginning of the portraits of Sikhs in a reorganized art school in Guler style and this mutual cordial behavior encouraged the Guler artist to approach the Sikh empire and rulers at Lahore that would contribute to the emergence of Sikh school of art, with Pahari influences.

Besides Guler another most significant centre of painting in the Punjab hills was Kangra, where Rajput artists also started looking for patronage from the Sikh rulers and governors, as they were in Guler region, which contributed to the development of a unique Pahari-Sikh style in the 18th century. A considerable change can be discovered in the works executed under the patronage of the Sikh rulers. The splendid, richly colored and vigorous representation of the myths and legends in the Kangra painting was replaced by a formalist pattern, in which the figures, trees and atmosphere were treated, and conventional color schemes used without achieving that vigor and intensity vested in the deep emotions of the Pahari artist.⁶

The Marriage of Fateh Chand's Grand Daughter with Hira Singh linked the Kangra to the Sikh empire at Lahore and later Maharaja's own marriage with the Sansar Chand's Daughters has strengthened the link much stronger. Kangra was now truly a Sikh state and it is this new circumstance that is going to reflect in the painting.⁷

This was a transition period for the painters of Kangra painting; there was a whole new situation in front of them. They were skilled in painting the Rajput themes and subjects, and had successfully established the Kangra *kalam* or Kangra School of art, under the Rajput rule in Kangra. Sikhs were now the new patron for Kangra painters, but their religious painting on theme of *bhakti* movement and feminine beauty were of least interest to the Sikhs. Sikhs were the imposed patron, and with no other option left Kangra painters were now to adapt as per as Sikh needs. As we have already discussed that the Kangra art had already reached its zenith during the Rajput rule, but Sikh patron's needs were as different as the Sikhs were from Rajputs. Therefore,

⁶ Aryan K. C., Punjab Painting, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1975, pg. no.15

⁷ Archer W. G, Painting of the Sikhs, VA Museum London, 1966. pg. 25

Kangra painters have no option left besides adjusting to the Sikh need. They used the same Kangra *kalam* to paint the Sikh themes and subjects. The Sikh Gurus were also depicted with iconography as it was developed for Hindu mythological themes. Sikhs are drawn wearing costumes which are influenced from Mughal miniature from the costumes of great Mughal emperors and also from the Punjabi culture. Like the halo that were being used by the Mughal artists Sikh Guru as well as some other Sikh noble and Maharaja himself were seen with halo and attendants usually holding a long parasol over the Guru's head.

Big and long poled royal umbrellas of silk fabric like the modern umbrella of today were also in fashion, which were used by Maharaja and his courtiers during their visits for hunting or expeditions, which was an emblem of royalty and also for the protection from heat and water in the summers and rains. There are various references that Mughals also used umbrellas but painters did not create the element of umbrella in Mughal paintings. Along with *Khillats* and royal gifts, given by Maharaja Ranjit Singh; royal umbrellas were also the part of gifts for the comfort of royal guests. After the Sikh influence; Guler Rajputs also became habitual of big umbrella, since Bhup Singh in which he is depicted in later royal paintings of Guler.⁸

Sikh lover and Kangra lady Fig 2:

As long as these were the Rajput subjects they were of least interest to the Sikhs, although their basic theme of love and passion, ideal lovers, had touched the Sikh imaginations. As the result a new type of picture was developed by the Kangra artist to fulfill Sikh need with some alteration of the roles. The *nayika* or the girls in the love story remain the hill women or Kangra lady, *nayak* or lover became the Sikh. Done in same conventional style of the Kangra painting, here a young Sikh is depicted as a lover of hill women who is embracing a young hill girl.

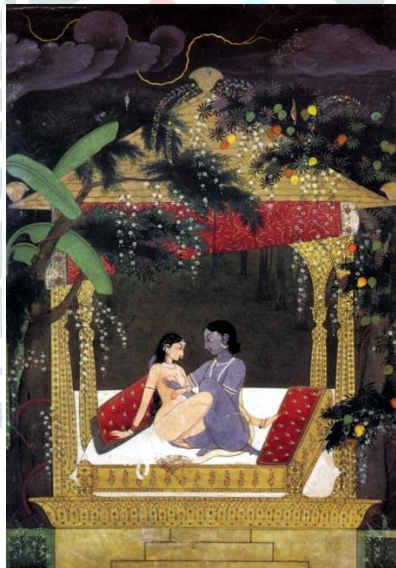
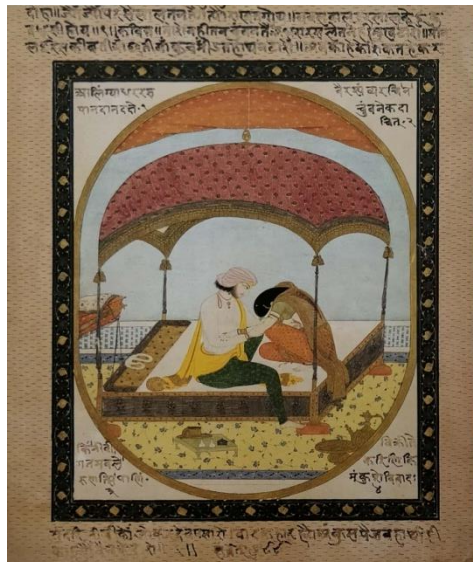


Fig 3. Krishna and Radha in a pavilion, Punjab hills, Guler style, late eighteenth century.

Various tools were used by the Pahari artists to fulfill the need of their Sikh patrons as they were least interested in Rajput themes. Therefore artists improvised their earlier compositions, where Radha or Kangra lady remains the same and Krishna was replaced by a Sikh as lover. With these alterations artists were able to relate Kangra Kalam to Sikh themes.

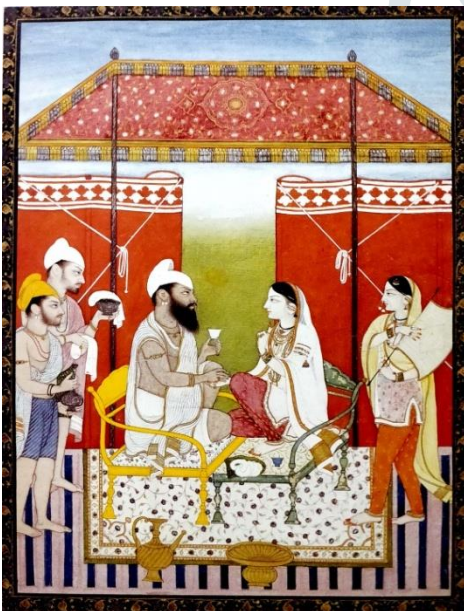
⁸ Waheeduddin, Syed Fakir, The real Ranjit Singh. Pakistan: Lion art press, (Karachi) Ltd. 1965. pg. 126



2. Sikh lover and Kangra lady c.1830, Pahari-Sikh style
From the family workshop of purkhu

Sikh Chief with a Kangra lady (fig: 4)

This alteration of role using same convention of Guler style also persists in another example of miniature painting done under the Sikhs at Punjab hills. Artists yet again replaced the Rajput Hindu ruler with Sikh chief although the Kangra lady remains the same.



4. Sikh Chief with Kangra lady



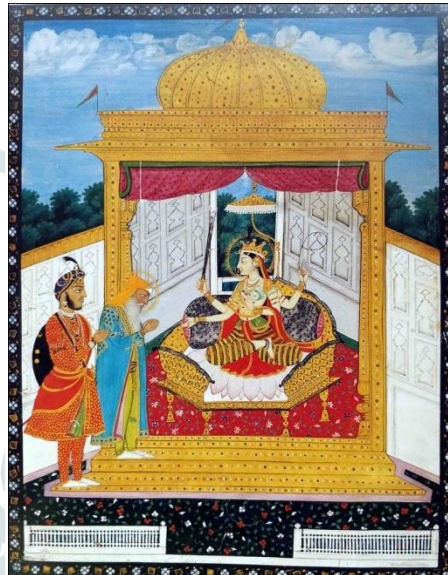
5. Maharaja with Kangra lady

Two great Sikh rulers are seen carousing with Kangra ladies, are few of many examples where the artists has used the conventional style with alteration of roles to adjust with the demands of their Sikh patrons. They replaced their Hindu chief with the Sikh chief, Krishna with a Sikh lover, Sikh chief praying to Hindu god or goddesses and many more. The themes come naturally to the Pahari artists from the various events occurring in their immediate surroundings like many Sikh nobles were marrying the local hill women of the area.

Although painting under the Sikhs were not only limited to these casual themes, besides them there were also a thorough documentation of various important event relating to the Maharaja and his courtiers. Such paintings are very useful in providing an insight into the history of the Sikhs, their lifestyle, customs and rituals.

In one such painting, Maharaja Ranjit Singh is seen paying homage to a Hindu Goddess (fig 6), although a believer of Sikh faith, he had a great amount of respect for other religions as well as people from different religions. This painting is testimony to his religious tolerance, a liberal man who also allowed his courtiers and other people to think or practice other religions and beliefs.

Two Sikh chiefs offering prayer to the Hindu goddess (fig 6)



Maharaja Ranjit Singh with his Grandson offering prayer to the Hindu goddess, Pahari-Sikh, from the family workshop of Nainsukh of Guler, early nineteenth century

The painting is testimony to the respect that the greatest Maharaja of the Sikhs had for different religious sects and faiths. His kind and liberal personality find mentioned again and again in *Umdat-ut-Tawrikh*, authored by Lala Sohan Suri.



Fig 7 The funeral of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Pahari-Sikh, from the family workshop of purkhu of Kangra ca.1840

Funeral of Maharaja Ranjit Singh is fine documentation of last customs and ritual performed by his family members, courtiers and many other assembled to give farewell to greatest Maharaja of the Sikhs, Ranjit Singh when he died in 1839. Importantly the painting depicts his two Gaddan Ranis whom he married after the annexation of Kangra and other seven slave girls along with the funeral pyre of the Maharaja who have burnt themselves alive with Maharaja's Funeral performing the ritual of Sati As soon as last rituals were performed, this scene of awful grandeur was immediately painted by a Pahari artist, testify the amount of respect Maharaja was having among the Pahari locals and on his four *Ranis* who have performed this act of supreme sacrifice. Sati, the custom of burning herself on her husband pyre is particularly a Hindu practice, not a Sikh. Although no would have questioned his four *Gaddan Ranis*, if they have avoided themselves to be sati, nevertheless they were keen to accompany the body to the flames.

So we can conclude easily that Pahari art from the Himalayan region is dynamic and vibrant part of Indian culture history which greatly contributed to the development of Sikh school of Arts, which later also became an important chapter of Indian art.

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