

## AN INSIGHT INTO THE ICONIC PORTRAITS OF GURU NANAK

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### **Abstract:**

It is my humble endeavour to trace, analyse and chronicle the development of iconic portraits of Guru Nanak Dev starting with the emergence of *Janam Sakhi* illustrations in manuscripts and *pothis* to the Modern and Contemporary period, deeply demystifying the historical, religious and social developments and gradual changes in elements and symbolism, content and narratives reflected in these magnificent and deeply spiritualised works of *Sikh art*. I bow my head in reverence to this great Guru whose 550<sup>th</sup> Prakash Utsav is being celebrated all over the world this year and hope this research paper will be able to generate some interest in the Nanak *Naam-leva* (devotees of Guru Nanak) irrespective of caste, creed and religion about the development of iconic portraits of the founder of Sikhism.

### **Keywords:**

Portraiture, Self-Portraits, Miniature Portraits, *Janam Sakhis*, *Varan*, Guru Nanak Dev, Bhai Gurdas, Guru Arjan Dev, *Pothis*, Pahari Miniatures, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Guler Artists, Lahora Singh, Singh Sabha Movement, Contemporary Portraits, Sobha Singh, Jaswant Singh, G.S. Sohan Singh etc.

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### **Introduction:**

The literal meaning of the term ‘*Portraiture*’ pertains to capturing the resemblance or likeness of a person living or who have been alive in two-dimensional flat surface<sup>1</sup>, using a variety of mediums such as lead pencil, charcoal stick, pen & ink, brush & ink or in water colours, oil colours, acrylics or in multi-media on paper, textiles, hides, ivory, ceramics, canvas, wood, board or any other smooth surface. But with the discovery of photography in the mid-1800s, camera took the mantle of capturing the photographs of people in their true physical form and it was a cheaper version than the painted portraits which used to be got done by commissioning talented and versatile portrait painters who excelled in capturing the physical as well as psychological persona of the person, either directly copying from the living model or by copying the earlier portraits by other artists or from a photograph. There

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are several types of portrait painting. During the medieval period in Europe or even before that, in the oldest civilizations of Egypt, India and China, artists with their limited knowledge of three-dimensional art mainly drew portraits in line drawings and these portraits are often in stylised versions, where artists used to follow a particular style as fancied by their patrons. Portraits are usually done in three-dimensional realistic form or in relief surface style to capture the resemblance of an important person for sustaining his/her memory. Though majority of the portraits are created while the subject is still alive, infact the portrait painting goes beyond simple documentation of physical features or attributes; actually it is the combination of both the physical appearance as well as the prominent qualities, highlighting values and strengths of the person in question perceived in a manner as the artist forms in his own comprehensive vision and preferred style and expression. This creative exercise depends upon artist's own aesthetical preferences for realism or abstraction or with imaginative, calculated and well-balanced mixture of both the styles, enabling the artist to capture the essence of the subject beyond mere outer appearance.

Getting a portrait painted by an eminent artist is a luxury today as it was during the last many centuries. Sometimes special portraits are got painted of a personality posthumously and many a times for events and social occasions for commemorating and for paying tributes to these well known personalities. Some artists also paint their own self-portraits from their own photographs or by observing their features in a mirror. And such self-portraits evocatively represent their individualistic styles and expressions in mediums of their choice, broadly glorifying prominent features of their artistic and intellectual vision accompanied by inherent symbolism and stylization. This also serves the purpose to showcase how a particular artist views his own image. To establish this fact there are numerous examples that several European painters, modern artists and even contemporary artists loved to paint their own 'Self-portraits' which are valued as great works of art endowed with high aesthetical value.<sup>2</sup> Since long many institutions, government establishments and even rich and influential people hire famous sculptors to create portraits or busts of famous personalities associated with them for memorial purposes. Another interesting trend followed by the artists is to paint portraits of their favourite artists reflecting on their intellectual, creative and artistic merits. Referred to some celebrated portraits such as '*Portrait of an art historian- Robert Rosenblum (1927-2006 A.D.)*' created by 'Kathleen Gilje' celebrating his deep study of history of art and another similarly done portrait by 'Jean Auguste- Domonique Ingres' of '*Comte de Pastoret (1791-1857 A.D.)*'. Gilje's portrait was

completed in 2006 A.D. and Ingres's portrait was completed in 1826 A.D.<sup>3</sup> These portraits were based on the observation of the artist about their subjects. Some portraits are only in representative style for example- '*Portrait of Alfred Stieglitz*' represents a photography portrait of 1915 A.D. where merely the bellows of a broken camera is depicted. 'Stieglitz' was a famous photographer, art dealer and husband of 'Georgia O' Keef'- the 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernist.<sup>4</sup> As painting was the only way to capture a person's likeness; many well-to-do families chose to memorialise people in fashionable meticulously painted 'Miniature Portraits' often done in enamel, gouache or water colours on animal skin, ivory, vellum or a similar silken stretched material. These fascinating portraits possess amazing details and speak volumes about the high standard of artistic calibre of these illustrious painters. Portraits can be as large as wall paintings often done by old masters in Europe. But the most important and incredible portrait which comes to our mind is that of 'Mona Lisa (1503 A.D.)' done by 'Leonardo da Vinci' on 2 foot 6 inch X 1 foot 9 inches poplar wooden panel. Many cultures attached formidable value to the portrait painting as it symbolises the majestic authority of the subject to commemorate and recognise their lifetime achievements lending sustenance to their lofty ideals and ethics marking their social status. In India, we find excellent specimens of portraits in miniature paintings done in Persian, Mughal, Rajasthani and Pahari styles with mesmerising details and captivating brushwork. These portraits are generally found in folios or in illustrated manuscripts accompanied by texts and narratives.

### **Tradition of Janam Sakhis:**

As far as art of portraiture is concerned in *Sikh art*, there is a confluence of several art schools and styles as Punjabi artists freely adopted some vibrant styles in vogue, comprising of artistic elements from miniature paintings, drawings and illustrated manuscripts. Sikh artists successfully incorporated in them the Sikh narratives. We find the first ever mention of illustrated *pothis* and portraiture based on the ethos and philosophy of Sikh religion in 1658 A.D. during the pontificate of 'Guru Har Rai'- the Seventh Sikh Guru as indicated by 'Dr. Fauja Singh'- an eminent Sikh historian.<sup>5</sup> Prior to that, there was a prevalence of oral as well as written text for *Janam Sakhis* sans illustrations being produced by the preachers of Sikh faith during the period of 'Guru Arjan Dev'- the Fifth Sikh Guru. It is evident in one of the *Vaaran* (ballad) of Bhai Gurdas who was a disciple of Guru Arjan Dev.<sup>6</sup> Though the early *pothis* with Sikh narrative and illustrations were akin to Hindu *pothis* and scriptures with illustrations done in simple line drawings illustrating the events from Guru Nanak's life and his messages of Universal Brotherhood, Oneness of God, Dignity of labour, Respect for

Women and Equality of all caste, creed, gender, religion and faiths. These illustrations were accompanied by simple texts and some stylised floral margins, many a times there was a presence of Hindu deities painted on the borders or *hashias*. As the demand grew for these illustrated *pothis*, the preachers contacted many important artisans or artists of the day to take up the task of creating a large number of illustrated manuscripts. **(Plate No.1)** Each artist dedicated his devotion and individualistic talent in the creation of these works and slowly yet steadily many versions of these manuscripts emerged with different stylizations, varying content and the extent of the thrust area which bordered on all aspects of Sikh religion, culture and ethos. **(Plate No.2)** To name a few prominent manuscripts amongst them are *Janam Sakhis*, *Puratan Janam Sakhi*, Mehraban's *Sachkhand Pothis*, Bhai Mani Singh's *Gian Ratnavali* and *Bhai Bala's Janam Sakhi*.<sup>7</sup> **(Plate No.3)** The credit for creating such wonderfully illustrated *pothis* and manuscripts mainly goes to *Udasi*, *Ramraiya* and *Sodhi deras* which sprang from the same sacred fountain of Sikhism. The main chunk of the task of preaching Sikhism though can be credited to *Udasi* who were deeply involved in this sacred and holy task of propagating the divine and ethereal messages of Guru Nanak Dev, as they took upon themselves to reach a large number of populace with Guru's messages.<sup>8</sup> It is amply clear from the earlier illustrated manuscripts and *pothis* that the accent on illustrations was mainly for religious purposes, as people were easily fascinated and drawn to illustrated depiction and thus the divine messages were comparatively easy to follow whereby touching the hearts and minds of the readers, devotees and followers. As the illustrations grew more decorative and elaborate with the presence of magnificent aesthetical charm, more and more artists with deep sense of design and vision started investing their finest artistic talents in the creation of these works and the result was remarkable and very satisfying due to the fact that besides conveying the message, these colourful illustrations had the capacity to engage the reader and offer him a slice of divinity and spiritualism in engrossingly interesting episodes from Nanak's life.

The term '*Sakhi*' emanates from Sanskrit word '*Sakshi*' meaning the evidence of all pervading mind and also the mind uniting with *Him* in a true witness to a phenomena or the unveiling of an enigma which demystifies the secrets of the universe and the omnipresent all encompassing God. Simply put *Sakhi* as we understand is an account of the events of Guru Nanak's life.<sup>9</sup> It is not necessary that the events projected in *Janam Sakhis* or in *Puranas* or in *Jatakas* for that matter are true accounts of life events of a particular spiritual personality but these are the true reflections and manifestations of divinity and spiritualism, deeply

embedded in the psyche of the devout as through these visions the faithful perceive and conceive a vision to connect with the cosmic light to savour the divine taste of *Brahmagyan* which has the potential to dispel the darkness from the minds of the people. Pragmatic depiction of life events coupled with the imaginative and lofty thoughts of the true followers propel their yearnings to touch the essence of divinity and love. Their minds feel blessed. Mythological events mingled with blissful joy and prayers magnify the insights of the believers as they are pregnant with deep symbolism and metaphors. In most of the illustrated *pothis* and manuscripts, Guru Nanak is often shown with his two devout companions- Bala and Mardana. Bhai Mardana is shown playing a *rabab* (rebeck) whereas Bhai Bala is shown with a peacock-feather whisk in his hand. Symbolically, it represents the integrity of Hindu and Muslim faiths. After going through innumerable changes and versions from the medieval period style to the miniature style and so on to other mixed styles, there are several stages involved in creation of Guru Nanak's image over the centuries. We come across the earliest painting with the image of Guru Nanak Dev from the middle of seventeenth century as this was that period when the main accent was on textual narratives accompanied by simple but impressive floral borders and margins. The development of the iconic image was a slow and steady process but it is interesting to note that this iconic image of Baba Nanak created over a period of time resembled in all the manuscripts and *pothis* of this period. But gradually, many additions and versions came out as showing Guru Nanak Dev wearing various attires and headgears. The subject of '*Four Udasis*' (spiritual travels) taken by the Guru not only dwelt on the actual episodes or events which happened during the travels but also offered humanistic and social morals, solutions to the problems and removal of dilemmas of the mankind dispelling the darkness of ignorance from the minds of the characters who met this Great Guru.

#### **Stages of development of Nanak's portraits:**

The landmark three stages of development of Guru Nanak's portraits can be roughly categorized into (i) 1658-1850 A.D. (ii) 1850-1900 A.D. (iii) from 1900 A.D. onwards till present day Contemporary period.<sup>10</sup> But there are no hard and rigid time periods in these three stages. These are conveniently divided to facilitate the study of development of portraits of Baba Nanak in myriad styles. In this context, it is clear that the illustrations of the first phase borrowed heavily from the *Pahari art* traditions and styles. **(Plate No.4)** '*Sher-e-Punjab: Maharaja Ranjit Singh*' established the grand Sikh empire and hearing about the grandeur and splendour of this empire, western painters flock to the Lahore Court in large

numbers to seek patronage from the Maharaja who was indeed a great patron of arts. They brought with them numerous art influences and painting techniques like oil on canvas, water colours, gouache, ink & brush drawings, woodcuts and lithography. Local Sikh artists exclusively adopted and mastered these painting techniques and they were successful in creating a large number of paintings attributed to showcase the divine and spiritual persona of Baba Nanak in new dimensions elaborately composed in scenic backdrops and natural landscapes sprinkled with flora and fauna. **(Plate No.5)** This artistic development brought a sea change in projecting the ideals of the Great Guru shown in sitting or standing poses accompanied by his permanent spiritual companions. This trend liberated the Sikh artists from the oft repeated rigid lines and gave them ample artistic freedom to explore their aesthetic acumens to enrich these paintings, which not only depicted Baba Nanak as a central figure but also felicitated to widen their vision in order to befittingly portray the divine persona and sublime ambience around his figure, showing trees laden with flowers, cascading waterfalls, deeply mystic and pristine mountains and ethereal skies where birds roam about blissfully. **(Plate No.6)** The third stage like the second stage is also very important, due to the fact that it offered a real chance to the artists with great talent and imagination, to go deeper into the divine qualities of the founder of Sikhism. Artists felt free to experiment with this theme which yielded works of great merit in Modern tradition, each artist attempting to explore one or the other aspects of Guru Nanak's personality. **(Plate No.7)** Dr. Fauja Singh- an eminent Sikh historian in some of his writings lays threadbare the initial trends in painting the portraits of Guru Nanak wherein the artist of the era preferred to employ all the elements and religious symbols as worn by Hindu saints and sages like *tilak* mark, crown cap, *saili*, *simrani* (rosary), nimbus and loose *jama* (robe) or a *kurta* (shirt) with the length reaching upto ankles.<sup>11</sup> The prevailing attire at that time was *kamarband*, a cloth tied to the waist to highlight the persona of a saintly person on a perennial move. The other necessary accessories were *bairagan* (resting stick) and *karmandal* (metallic utensil) and *padukas* (wooden clogs). **(Plate No.8)** All these items were depicted in these interesting paintings to project the profound and dynamic saintliness of the Guru. To emphasise on the central figure of the eminent saintly personality, the artist used the technique of portraying the central figure with three-quarter facial view. The other accompanying figures used to be painted in profile from right or left. Guru Nanak is shown sitting on a rug or carpet or a simple decorative piece of cloth accompanied by Bhai Bala carrying a peacock-feather whisk and Bhai Mardana. The canopy of a tree over the head of the Guru is a common feature in most



paintings. The crown cap worn by the Guru is denoted his divinity and holiness.<sup>12</sup> The masterpieces created during this phase were basically inspired from the ‘Kangra Miniatures’ but to highlight the revered and exalted spiritual position of the Guru, keeping in mind the Sikh sentiments, elements like wooden *takht* (throne) with a cylindrical *takia* (cushion) supporting his back and a shawl thrown over his back and shoulders further enhanced his saintly persona.<sup>13</sup>

With departure from the Kangra style miniatures, the works created during middle of nineteenth century show some apparent changes in the portrayal of Guru Nanak Dev as Hindu symbols like *tilak*, nimbus and the canopy of a tree disappeared. Here Guru Nanak is shown ahead of other figures and in more typical Punjabi attire which perhaps is supposed to be the Khalsaised version of the Guru with long beard, a differently tied turban and a free flowing *parna* (long cloth worn around the neck). In yet another series of portrait paintings mostly done by Guler artists during 1870 A.D., the facial features of Guru Nanak vary from painting to painting as showing him wearing different types of headgears and the length of the beard also varies in each work. His cap is in the design resembling a crown, often conical in form and a piece of cloth tied around it and in some works, the cap is absolutely missing and he is shown wearing a turban but the main feature of three-quarter view of the face remains. These paintings look a bit amateurish and lack fine aesthetical value. As decades passed, the glimpses of earlier old traditions started disappearing altogether and the new generation artists during the end of nineteenth century preferred not to borrow from the legendary old versions and they set out to create Guru Nanak’s images which focussed entirely on his divine image focussing mainly on the coveted events associated with his life. This was entirely in contrast to the initial illustrated narratives found in *Janam Sakhis*. Some artists still carried the tradition of showing him with a *mukat* (crown) but also made it a mark to portray him in the Punjabi habitat and environs. The credit for ushering in a new era of modern tradition portraiture goes to ‘Lahora Singh’- a renowned Sikh painter.<sup>14</sup>

With Maharaja Ranjit Singh on throne of grand Sikh empire, painters were profusely patronised and commissioned to reinforce through their paintings the glorious Sikh traditions and the splendour of their majestic power. These talented painters equipped with European style painting techniques created a large body of work presenting scenes from the *Lahore Durbar* with Sikh nobles, generals and courtiers<sup>15</sup> and there was an undisputed consensus among them to get the painters to paint the intensely spiritual and divine portraits of their Gurus especially of Guru Nanak Dev and Guru Gobind Singh. This moment was instrumental

in spreading the Sikh art form and traditions in a big way besides being responsible for the propagation of Sikh religion and faith. For example *Nanakshahi* coins were minted and even *Nanakshahi* bricks came into existence. The profound image of Guru Nanak Dev reigned supreme on the minds of these powerful rulers as their guiding spirit and the subjects reverently adored and worshipped the teachings of Baba Nanak. Thus the paintings created under the patronage of this regime were infact elaborately modified versions of the already popular themes. In support of this fact, we have a *Sakhi pothi* dated 1883 A.D. which has exclusive yet minutely painted portraits of Guru Nanak Dev projecting him as Baba Nanak as an old grand saint wearing a crown sized cap with the addition of a plume (*kalgi*) shown seated on a *takht* (throne) with a conical *takia* (cushion) behind his back. In one of the illustrations of this *pothi*, Baba Nanak is depicted being taken to the ‘*Sachkhand*- the truthful abode of God’ by the celestial beings interestingly the angels look like Sikhs. This has been obtained from old Moti Bagh Palace’s Sheesh Mahal in Patiala.<sup>16</sup> Another feature which is noticeable in the paintings of Guru Nanak Dev created during ‘Singh Sabha Movement’ is the gradual disappearance of mythical and supernatural characters but this was not taken very kindly by some parallel groups of Sikh devotees of Guru Nanak who also staked their claim to Sikhism and considered Guru Nanak as their true Guru as he stood for all encompassing humanity and spiritual ethos. A number of followers believed that the effect of western style paintings is not the true representations of *Sikh art*. This ideological revolt grew from strength to strength with each passing day.<sup>17</sup>

### **Contemporary Perceptions and Narrative:**

Indigenous Punjabi artists especially Sikhs though did not outrightly reject the western style of painting which represented realism. They infact pursued it earnestly to project idealism in a realistic manner which captured the imagination of the masses. This period indeed was a new dawn with a balanced approach of Indian traditional content executed in western mannerisms and techniques. A number of paintings focussed on only Guru Nanak’s spiritual personality and Bala and Mardana his favourite companions were not represented as in earlier works, though the presence of Bala and Mardana was for the purpose of epitomising the ‘Communal Harmony’: the main plank of Guru Nanak’s philosophy. This new trend of painting Guru Nanak individually resulted in the creation of very blissful and divine portraits of Guru Nanak Dev devotedly painted by artist ‘Sobha Singh’, ‘Kirpal Singh’, ‘Jaswant Singh’, ‘Bawa Ram Singh’ and ‘Mohinder Singh’. Sobha Singh mainly focussed on the divine and spiritual aura of the Guru without taking into consideration any historical facts and



backgrounds. His paintings are glowing with the radiation of contemplation and ecstasy seeped in eternal joy and divine love (**Plate No.9**) whereas as portraits of Guru Nanak by Kirpal Singh are juxtaposed with historical features and events. Miniature paintings of Bawa Ram Singh like Sobha Singh were not based on any historical perspectives. In paintings done by Kirpal Singh, Guru Nanak is represented as a 'tireless preacher' and a 'crusader of truth' and is always shown on the move, meeting and interacting with a large number of people. (**Plate No.10**) But Sobha Singh's accent was on presenting the heavenly spirit of Baba's dynamic personality engaged in liberating the minds and souls of the misled masses and the ignorant. In a complete departure, the surrealistic works of Jaswant Singh employed symbolism and metaphors to highlight the true spirit and essence of Guru Nanak's humanistic teachings depicting him in altogether new manifestations. (**Plate No.11**) Liberally improvised and endowed with a distinct flavour of earthly yet mystic charm lent to the portraits of Guru Nanak were the refreshing works of celebrated artists like 'G.S. Sohan Singh', 'Master Gurdit Singh', 'Arjan Singh', 'Krishen Khanna', a lady artist 'Gian Kaur' from Srinagar, 'Arpana Kaur' and 'Arpita Singh'. It is pertinent to mention here that several mesmerising portraits of Guru Nanak were done by master painter- 'G.S. Sohan Singh' from Amritsar which oozed a blissful divine aroma of purity, spirituality and the representation of saintly demeanour of the true messenger of the Almighty. (**Plate No.12**) Besides having powerful compositions, these paintings were pure and tender like a fresh dewdrop with magnificently soothing backgrounds in appealing colour palette. He has shown the sea of humanity at the lotus feet of this great Guru for whom all humans were from the same cosmic and celestial source. Amongst the prominent iconic portraits of Sardar Sobha Singh are 'Naam Khumari Nanaka (1937 A.D.)' (**Plate No.13**), 'Guru Nanak Dev in Aashirwad pose (1950 A.D.)' (**Plate No.14**), 'Eko Simro Nanaka (1968 A.D.)' (**Plate No.15**) and 'My Meditations on Guru Nanak-I & II (1966 A.D.)' (**Plate No.16 & 17**). The Sikh followers around the globe today recognise these portraits as the most iconic as well as well accepted images of Guru Nanak and several disciples of Sardar Sobha Singh have tried to produce replicate similar images. These have been reproduced in large numbers in the form of multi-coloured calendars. Though there may be some variations here and there as per the technical and aesthetic calibre of specific new generation artists who have the luxury to use different mediums and art materials possessing varying degrees of artistic skills acquired by them. These portraits of Guru Nanak have standardised the iconic image of the Guru and the reproductions of these works are revered by the devout followers of Guru Nanak respectfully adorning the walls of

their houses. The change which we see is also the result of the change of social milieus and human perceptions which are never static and keep on evolving with the passage of time.

**Summary:**

The portraits of Guru Nanak done over the centuries also simultaneously project the illustrious history of Sikh religion and the various stages of social developments brought out by the humanistic values adoringly and dedicatedly preached by the preachers supported by saintly artists. Passing through myriad terrains of cultural ethos and philosophical evolution, the river of spiritual nectar continues to flow inspiring the mankind as art and literature are the main arteries of human consciousness through which flows the essence of humanism. Guru Nanak's portraits are not merely images of his facial features but they are endowed with the power of transforming an ordinary soul to envision his perceptions to relish the ethereal and celestial bliss. The sacred words '*Nanak Naam Chardikala Tere Bhane Sarbat Da Bhala*' truly define his ideology that there should be welfare of all mankind. It is with a sincere hope that coming generations of artists will keep on drawing inspirational strength from the universal messages of Guru Nanak Dev and rededicate their artistic faculties towards the truthful portrayal of Guru Nanak's multifaceted persona.



Plate No. 1

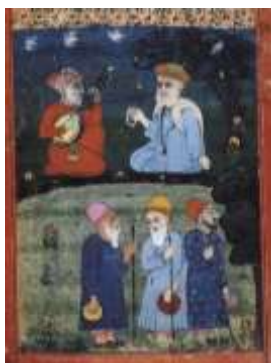


Plate No. 2



Plate No. 3



Plate No. 4



Plate No. 5

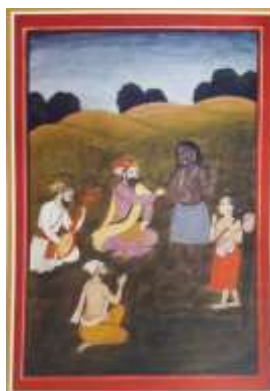


Plate No. 6

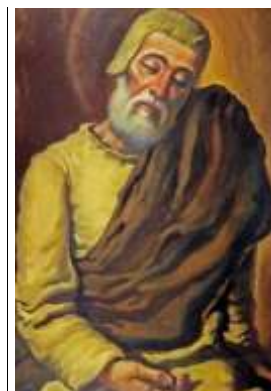


Plate No. 7

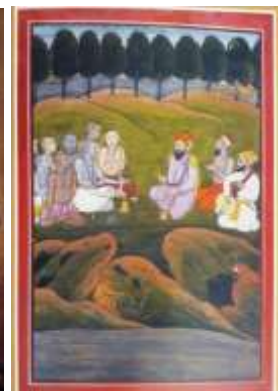


Plate No. 8



Plate No. 9



Plate No. 10



Plate No. 11



Plate No. 12



Plate No. 13



Plate No. 14



Plate No. 15



Plate No. 16



Plate No. 17

**List of Plates:**

1. *Janam Sakhi* illustrations from painted *Pothis* or Manuscripts.
2. Earlier *Janam Sakhi* Illustrations.
3. Guru Nanak with Bala and Mardana from the folio of *Janam Sakhi*.
4. Guru Nanak with disciples of the Jogi, Balnath from Pahari style Miniature.
5. Guru Nanak and the Khatri, Dinanath, Sikh-Pahari style Miniature, last quarter of 18<sup>th</sup> century.
6. Guru Nanak subdues Kaliyuga, Sikh-Pahari style Miniature, last quarter of 18<sup>th</sup> century.
7. Portrait of Guru Nanak by Artist Jaswant Singh in Modernist style.

8. Guru Nanak with a group of Sadhus, Sikh-Pahari style Miniature, last quarter of 18<sup>th</sup> century.
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12. Guru Nanak Dev by Artist G.S. Sohan Singh.
13. *Naam Khumari Nanaka* by Artist Sobha Singh.
14. Guru Nanak Dev in Aashirwad pose by Artist Sobha Singh.
15. *Eko Simro Nanaka* by Artist Sobha Singh.
16. My Meditations on Guru Nanak-I by Artist Sobha Singh.
17. My Meditations on Guru Nanak- II by Artist Sobha Singh.



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