

A STUDY OF VISUAL NARRATIVES ON THE LIFE OF GURU TEGH BAHADUR

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Abstract

In this research paper, a dedicated effort has been made to highlight the life-events of Guru Tegh Bahadur ji, paying glorious tributes to his supreme sacrifice for the protection of freedom to chose and practice one's own faith and religion. The researcher has systematically and analytically chronicle the visual narratives pertaining to Guru's divine, spiritual and humanistic messages, by critically studying a large number of paintings done by stalwart Sikh artists, on his life's episodes, minutely studying the artistic, creative and aesthetic content in these masterly works of *Sikh art* which find enshrined in Sikh museums, art galleries of Gurdwaras and in private collections. The further endeavour of the researcher was to amply showcase the great work done by generations of artists and imploring the artists from younger generation to study deeply the golden chapters of Sikh history which have the power to inspire the spirit of valour and spiritualism in one's heart and soul as preached by the Guru.

Keywords: *Guru Tegh Bahadur, Guru Hargobind, Bibi Gujri, Bhai Gurdas, Baba Buddha, Tyaga Mal, Makkhan Shah Lubana, Raja Chankar dhawaj, Raja Ram Singh, Gobind Rai, Baba Bakala, Sardar Sobha Singh, Sardar G.S. Sohan Singh, Sardar Kirpal Singh, Master Gurdit Singh, Trilok Singh Chitarkar, Sardar Jaswant Singh, Hind di Chaddar, Bhai Mati Dass, Bhai Sati Dass, Bhai Dyala, Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib, Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib, New Delhi and Bhai Jaita.*

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Introduction

Today the world is feverishly engaged in upholding the humanistic values and rights of all mankind, ensuring equal freedom and opportunities to people without any bias against caste, creed, religion, nationality, race, colour or gender, language, culture and ethnic backgrounds, where a person is fully free to follow the chosen path of his/her faith, belief, sect or religion or the mode of self-expression and practising of free speech. Infact we can say it with pride in our hearts that the seeds of these modern day lofty ideals of humanism were sown by the great Sikh Gurus who sacrificed their lives to secure the right of the people to worship their chosen religion unhindered. This year we are celebrating 400th Prakash Utsav (Birth Anniversary) of Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur ji- the Ninth Sikh Guru who is considered the ‘Shiromani Martyr’ in the glorious traditions of Sikh history. The sacrifice of Guru Tegh Bahadur cemented in place, at the core of Sikh values, the importance of standing up and defending religious freedom for all people. His martyrdom was a superb act of self-giving. In some parts of the world we witness instances of world being pulled apart by fundamentalist sectarian and religious violence, we can call on the memory of this saintly demonstration of how to resist tyranny; whether that tyranny takes the form of the threat of physical violence or by the tyranny of rigid, fanatic ideology.

Guru Tegh Bahadur ji- the apostle of peace and sacrifice was born in Amritsar in a house known as ‘*Guru ke Mahal*’ on 1st April, 1621. He was the fifth son of Bibi Nanaki and Guru Hargobind- the Sixth Sikh Guru who laid the foundation of the concept of ‘Miri (Temporal Power)’ and ‘Piri (Spiritual Power)’ in Sikhism. Guru Hargobind named his son as ‘Tyaga Mal’ and he was given proper education and marshal training and he excelled in the art of warfare. He was wise, kind, brave and fearless in his teens. Bhai Gurdas was his mentor and under him he attained command on several languages, philosophy, arts, music, culture and poetry. Under Baba Buddha, he attained mastery in archery and horse riding and other marshal skills befitting for a would be fearless warrior. Guru Hargobind took upon himself to teach his young son the fine nuances of swordsmanship. From the very onset, he was deeply interested in philosophy and spiritualism which was instrumental in making him a towering poet and a mystic.¹ Taking cue from the golden pages of Sikh history, the transition from the name ‘Tyaga Mal’ to ‘Tegh Bahadur’ is aptly mentioned in the episode that as barely in teens Tyaga Mal proved his marshal mettle in the battlefield at Kartarpur against Mughal forces

under Painde Khan and succeeded in defeating him in 1635. Sikh forces fondly started calling him 'Tegh Bahadur' meaning 'The brave Sword Wielder'. He was married to Bibi Gujri in 1632 at a very young age. Lal Chand, a resident of Kartarpur whose daughter Bibi Gujri was married to Tegh Bahadur. Lal Chand was a kind, enlightened yet a rich person who was married to Bishan Kaur. It is notable here that Tegh Bahadur and Bibi Gujri's first child 'Gobind Rai (later Guru Gobind Singh)' was born on 22 December, 1666 at Patna Sahib and during the course of this time Tegh Bahadur had already been proclaimed as 'Ninth Sikh Guru'.²

There is an interesting story behind the anointment of Tegh Bahadur as the Ninth Guru of the Sikhs. Guru Harkrishan ji- the Eight Sikh Guru did not specifically name the Ninth Master as he prepared to leave the world. He simply said the two words "Baba Bakala" implying that his successor would be found in Bakala. On hearing the news, many imposters set themselves up there, even as Tegh Bahadur remained aloof and immersed in meditation. The identification of Tegh Bahadur as the next Sikh Guru was done by a wealthy trader- 'Makkhan Shah Lubana' on the basis of a test that he carried out. Makkhan Shah Lubana had been in danger when his ship got stuck in a storm in the high seas; at that stage he had promised to donate five hundred gold coins to the 'House of the Guru' if his life was saved. On reaching the shores, Makkhan Shah Lubana set forth to make good his promise and found that Guru Harkrishan had passed away after saying that the next master would be found in Baba Bakala. He then set forth to Baba Bakala where he found many contenders to the seat. He tested each one of them by offering two gold coins for his safety which they accepted. He walked from one street to another, paying obeisance and offering two gold *mohars* to each of the so called 'Gurus' he met, but obtained satisfaction from nowhere. Finally his attention was drawn towards a person seated on a wooden plank lost in meditation. Makkhan Shah Lubana bowed before him and politely asked his name and offered two Gold *mohars*. The saint blessed him with a divine smile and he told Makkhan Shah in a soft tone that how he has forgotten that he would offer 500 hundred gold *mohars* to someone who will save his cargo boat filled with rich merchandise from the fury of the wild sea storm. Makkhan Shah was amazed to hear these words from this saint. This saint was none other than 'Tegh Bahadur'. Hearing the exact words which he had promised from this saint, he came to know that this was the real Guru and in excitement and joy he went up on the rooftop and raising his arms and he loudly proclaimed: "*Guru ladho re, Guru ladho re* (I have found the Guru, I have found the Guru)."³

Celebrated Sikh historian- Bhai Santokh Singh has written in 'Sri Guru Pratap Suraj Granth' that the hallmark of a saint is 'Forgiveness'. And he further writes, "*Forgiveness is the austerity most meritorious; forgiveness is the best of charities. Forgiveness is equivalent to all the pilgrimages and ablutions. In forgiveness lies liberation. No other virtue parallels forgiveness. Forgiveness you must learn.*" To explain the virtues of forgiveness, he has mentioned about an episode wherein he writes, "*Guru Tegh Bahadur's nephew Dhir Mall became jealous of Guru Tegh Bahadur's exalted position when he was declared 'Ninth Guru of the Sikhs'. Dhir Mall's henchmen ransacked Guru Tegh Bahadur's house and destroyed the household articles. On learning this, Guruji remained calm and quiet. Then Makkhan Shah Lubana ransacked Dhir Mall's house and carried away his household items. But Guruji did not like this kind of retaliation. He personally made it a point to restore all valuable articles to Dhir Mall's house saying: 'To err is human and forgiveness is divine'.*"⁴

It is described in 'Bhatt Vahi Talauda Pargana Jind' that the anointment of Guru Tegh Bahadur ji took place on the day of Bhadon Amavas 1721Bk/ 11 August, 1664. To spread the humanistic message of Sikhism and to communicate with the growing number of Sikh followers, Guruji undertook several spiritual travels in many parts of India such as Kiratpur, Majha region (Amritsar, Tarn Taran, Goindwal, Khadur Sahib), Malwa region (Zira, Moga, Darauli, Bathinda, Faridkot) and Bangar districts of the Punjab, Dhamdhan near Jind, Bilaspur, Makhoyal, Bahadurgarh near Patiala, Delhi, Mathura, Agra, Etawah, Kanpur, Fatehpur, Allahabad, Mirzapur, Banaras, Sasaram, Bodhgaya, Patna, Dhaka and Chittagong (now in Bangladesh) passing through a large number of villages, towns and cities, engaging in discourse with people from all sects and religions. He was a man of peace and always believed in reconciliation amongst all sections of society. His major contribution in this respect is bringing in peace between Raja Chankardhawaj- an Ahom ruler of Assam and Raja Ram Singh of Amber. Heeding the wise advice of reconciliation given by Guruji, these kings promised to shed hatred and violence in a pursuance to solve their political and territorial conflicts. They settled their disputes amicably with mutual interactions and discussions.⁵ Thus saving lots of bloodshed as Guru's advice to them was '*Hatred divides and Love unites*'. Now there stands a monument in honour of the Guru who propagated peace, love, joy and equality for all human beings.

Events and episodes related to Guru Tegh Bahadur's life inspired a large number of Sikh painters who devoted their entire lives in recreating the scenes from the pages of magnificent Sikh history on their canvases in their own inimitable styles and genres in

masterly strokes. For them this exercise was not only pursuance of their artistic career but a sacred task to portray and represent the true manifestations and ethics embedded in Sikh philosophy and divine and eternal ethos as preached by the Sikh Gurus. Their large body of work on Sikh religious themes today finds enshrined in numerous art galleries and museums primarily created and curated by Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, Amritsar and other corporate houses. Amongst the several prominent painters whose contribution is of immense artistic, religious and historic value are Sardar Sobha Singh, Sardar G.S. Sohan Singh, Sardar Kirpal Singh, Master Gurdit Singh, Trilok Singh Chitrakar, Sardar Jaswant Singh, Sardar Amolak Singh and Sardar Devender Singh to name a few. These masterpieces comprise of large oil on canvas paintings and portraits of Guru Tegh Bahadur ji and on important aspects of his life-events.

Supreme Sacrifice

The most favourite theme in these Sikh paintings is the sacrifice of Guru Tegh Bahadur at Chandni Chowk in Delhi. Just a few years before Guru Tegh Bahadur ji was given the throne of Guru, Mughal emperor- Aurangzeb rose to power by deposing and imprisoning his father, Shahjahan and killing his rival brothers. Aurangzeb's forty-nine year rule as emperor was a time of the most cruel and brutal acts of tyrannical repression against anyone who did not embrace his strict interpretation of Islam than any time in history. He decreed millions of forced conversions of non-Muslims and the destruction of thousands of temples throughout India. As the Pandits and Brahmins of Kashmir were regarded to be the most devout among all Hindus, Aurangzeb decided that he would specifically target them in his campaign of forced conversions with the idea that if the Kashmiri Pandits were converted to Islam, then other Hindus would easily become more submissive. The Emperor sent a decree to the Kashmiri Pandits that they had a short window of time to decide to either convert to Islam or be put to death. During the course of their history, Sikhs had earned the reputation of defenders of righteousness against tyranny and oppression and about 500 Kashmiri Pandits had approached Guru Tegh Bahadur ji at Sri Anandpur Sahib to save them from forced conversion into Islam and protect their religion. Guru Tegh Bahadur ji determined that the only way forward was for him to make a counter offer to Aurangzeb, that if the Emperor could convince Guruji to convert to Islam, then the Kashmiri Pandits would do the same.⁶ Finally Guru Tegh Bahadur ji was arrested and brought to Delhi. His three disciples namely Bhai Mati Dass, Bhai Sati Dass and Bhai Dyala were brutally tortured in

front of his eyes and put to death by the Mughal soldiers to shake his commitment to his faith. But Guruji remained calm and unperturbed. Guruji did not submit to their threats of a violent death and offered his head instead to safeguard the cause of religious freedom. Being a saviour of the Hindu religion, today India is proud to confer on him the title of '*Hind ki Chaddar*'. Guru Gobind Singh summed up his father's supreme sacrifice in the following words:

Teekar for dhilees sir prabh purkeeaapayaan

Teg Behaadhar see kriaa karee n kine hoo(n)aan

Teg Behaadhar kae chalath bhayo jagath kosok

Hai hai hais abh jag bhayo jai jai jai sur lok

(He burst the bonds of mortal clay and went on to the abode of God.

No one ever performed an act as noble as did Tegh Bahadur.

With the departure of Tegh Bahadur the world was stricken with sorrow.

A wail of horror rent the earth, a victor's welcome by the dwellers of heaven.)

Iconic Portrait

An iconic portrait of Guru Tegh Bahadur was painted by the doyen of *Sikh art*- Sardar Sobha Singh in 1975. **(Plate No.1)** He has magnificently captured the divine aura on the face of Guruji seated in deep meditation. The brushstrokes are masterly and marvellously capture his saintly persona. The artist is successful in capturing each and every detail of Guru's attire and details in the surroundings. There is a suggestion of symbolism of divine light and wisdom which is captured with the depiction of a lamp. Peace reigns in this soothing and ethereal work. The genre of this painting is Photo-realism. The work is done in oil on canvas technique. This is perhaps the most popular portrait of Guru Tegh Bahadur ji which finds its presence in Sikh homes in the form of multi-coloured reproductions/prints.

Guru Ladho Re

On the theme of '*Guru ladho re*' artist Master Gurdit Singh of Amritsar in 1966⁷ has painted a remarkable composition, bringing alive in a dramatic manner the whole episode of Guru being discovered by Makkhan Shah Lubana in Baba Bakala. His visual narration is par excellence and he has displayed a complete dexterity in capturing large number of human figures and a keen sense of perspective. In this painting, Makkhan Shah Lubana is shown mounted on a simple muddy structure raising his hand in ecstasy and loudly uttering the

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words: *Guru ladho re, Guru ladho re* and down below Tegh Bahadur is shown sitting and interacting with Makkhan Shah who is deeply moved and excited filled with a sense of bliss. The scene also depicts a large gathering of various so called saints moving around on the shores of a waterfront. In the bellowing and rolling clouds, there is a hint of a small ship laden with precious goods owned by the businessman-Makkhan Shah Lubana. The whole painting is drenched in a divine light and one can feel the essence of ethereal delight charged with religious and pious fervour. **(Plate No.2)** Master Gurdit Singh is well known for handling large canvases. He had a keen sense of composition and has often used symbolic elements in his masterly works which have the capacity to enthrall and capture one's attention immediately. He devoted considerable time in capturing the minute details in his paintings. This slice from Sikh history has a coveted place in *Sikh art*.

Saviour of the Dharma

Another stalwart Sikh artist-Sardar G.S. Sohan Singh has painted the scene of Guru Tegh Bahadur's *Darbarin* elaborate details where Gurujis shown sitting on a raised *Gaddi* (*Takht* in Punjabi) alongwith his young son- Gobind Rai (later Guru Gobind Singh).⁸ His followers are shown standing in respectful attendance at the back of the *Takht*. Guruji is blessing and interacting with a large group of Kashmiri Pandits attired in their typical costumes who have been shown narrating the tales of their misery and sorrows and the instances of oppression and threats of forced conversions to Islam by cruel Aurangzeb. The artist has wonderfully captured each and every gesture of the persons present in the *Darbar* with an expectation of Guru's help and support lit large on their faces. Outside the *Darbar*, one can see depiction of distant hills and rolling green pastures. G.S. Sohan Singh's eye for intricate details and depiction of splendour of the Guru's *Darbar* is portrayed in a very aesthetic manner and the colour palette has been handled in a subtle way. The whole composition is infused in homogeneous and harmonious manner. **(Plate No.3)** This episode is one of the important chapters of Guru Tegh Bahadur's life where he assured the grieving and sad Kashmiri Pandits that he will stand against the tyranny and help them in preserving their religious freedom and ultimately he offered his head and attained martyrdom.

A Fearless Mystic

Artist Jaswant Singh who has painted many paintings based on Sikh history, is known for his deft handling of the composition and a love for detail and realism. He has skilfully and

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imaginatively captured the episode of Guru Tegh Bahadur being arrested and imprisoned in an iron cage. Gurujis sitting in a meditative posture and his face is glowing in the divine light. In the background outside the cage, Mughal soldiers are shown surrounding this cage. Some of them are deep in slumber. This is a moving painting and the artist has successfully brought alive the peaceful persona of the Guru even in the event of arrest. **(Plate No.4)**

Unwavering Faith

The next painting by artist Kirpal Singh (1957)⁹ shows Guru Tegh Bahadur seated on the ground surrounded by tyrant and cruel Mughal soldiers and *Qazis* forcing him to convert to Islam or his head will be severed from his body for defying the order of Aurangzeb. **(Plate No.5)** Artist Kirpal Singh had devoted his entire life in recreating the important events of Sikh history in his powerful and evocative style with quick brushwork in oil on canvas technique. He has often painted large compositions based on the Sikh wars and the oppressive policies of the Mughals who were known for forced conversions of Hindus. He has done a series of paintings on this subject with variation in compositions and has skilfully captured the true spirit of the environment by carefully studying the costumes of the people of that era and the rural and rustic flavour of the surroundings. Each painting speaks volume of his artistic calibre as he has strived to truthfully narrate the incidents without unnecessary elaborations and has mainly focussed his attention to the narration of the event aesthetically in a dramatic manner.

Unshakable Service to the Guru

To make him succumb to their evil acts of forced religious conversions, the Mughals tortured Guru Tegh Bahadur's three devoted disciples namely Bhai Mati Dass, Bhai Sati Dass and Bhai Dyala. In a heartrending painting painted by Sardar Kirpal Singh in 1957, Bhai Mati Dass's whole body is being sawed into half by the menacingly tyrant and dreadful Mughal soldiers with the help of a large saw as he refuses to accept Islam **(Plate No.6)** and similarly in yet another horrific manner,¹⁰ Bhai Dyala is shown being boiled alive in a large cauldron of boiling water by the Mughal executioners.¹¹ This painting is done by artist Master Gurdit Singh in 1968. The flames are shown rising to the sky covering the cauldron and executioners are keeping the fire burning. At a distance, a large gathering of people are witnessing this era in astonishment with fear lit large on their faces. The executioners keep on displaying the worst kind of barbarism and brutalising a saintly person for conversion to Islam. **(Plate**

No.7) In the third painting devoted to this event, Bhai Sati Dass is being wrapped in cotton and an executioner is lighting the fire in front of Guru Tegh Bahadur ji who sitting calmly in an iron cage.¹² But all these inhuman atrocities could not force the Guru to accept Islam. These brutalities have perhaps no comparison. But the brave and saintly Sikhs did not surrender to the tyrants and gladly sacrifice their lives to uphold the values of freedom to practice one's own religion. This painting too is done by Sardar Kirpal Singh in 1957. One can see the structure of Red Fort, New Delhi in the background. The painting is seeped in an uneasy calm but the light of the divinity and spiritualism glows on Guru Tegh Bahadur ji and Bhai Sati Dass ji who too was martyred before Guru Tegh Bahadur. (Plate No.8)

Rangretta- Guru ka Beta

On 11th November, 1675, Guru Tegh Bahadur ji made the supreme sacrifice and he was beheaded in Chandni Chowk area where now stands Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib at New Delhi. His body was whisked off by a Lubana devotee, Lakhi Shah Vanjara, with the support of his sons and others, and burnt along with his house before dawn at Raisana village, to dodge the Mughal administration. The mortal remains were picked up and buried on the spot in a brass vessel. Gurdwara Rakab Ganj commemorates the hallowed place today. In an act of dare-devilry, Bhai Jaita in collaboration with devotees like Nanu, Agya and Uda, carried away the decapitated head of Guru Tegh Bahadur to Sri Anandpur Sahib where his son Guru Gobind Singh performed the obsequies on 16th November, 1675.¹³ Artist Trilok Singh Chitrakar has painted a remarkable painting on this theme in oil on canvas medium where he has created the scene of a jungle storm, furious winds lashing the trees and bushes and braving the storm, Bhai Jaita ji is shown respectfully carrying the severed head of Guru Tegh Bahadur ji wrapped in a cloth walking for many days in the jungle away, hiding from the curious eyes of the Mughal soldiers and he reaches Sri Anandpur Sahib where he met Gobind Rai (later Guru Gobind Singh) son of Guru Tegh Bahadur- the Ninth Sikh Guru for doing the last rites. (Plate No.9) Here on this occasion Gobind Rai (later Guru Gobind Singh) praising Bhai Jaita's (Rangretta's) courage and bravery remarked: '*Rangretta, Guru ka Beta*' meaning '*Rangretta is the true son of the Guru*'. The artist in this painting has displayed his marvellous creative capacity to capture the scene very vividly and evocatively that everyone is moved seeing this great work of art and it also portrays the bravery, valour and dedication of this Sikh disciple.

Summary

A large number of Sikh artists have been inspired by the universal, spiritual and divine ethos and messages of Guru Tegh Bahadur ji and today we have a mammoth body of work on this theme where each artist has successfully brought alive in his own genre and style the glorious episodes depicting the valour and spiritual flavour. As this year we are celebrating the 400th Prakash Utsav of Guru Tegh Bahadur ji, many Sikh organisations along with state and central government's coordination and cooperation are planning to organise several important events (Exhibition of paintings, Seminars, Lectures, Calligraphy competition on Guru's *Bani*, Gurmat Sangeet programmes, Special Publications and folders of the paintings done on Guru's life) paying tribute to this 'Saviour of Hindu Dharma' as he respectfully earned the title of '*Hind ki Chaddar*'. It is expected that the organisers will make it a point to display these artistic and remarkable paintings at different places so that the younger generation and non-Sikhs may also have a chance to enlighten themselves and be proud of the supreme sacrifice of this Guru. The artists belonging to younger generation should also study the history of Sikhs deeply and get inspiration and motivation so that they also contribute and create new works of art.

Plate 1: Portrait of Guru Tegh Bahadur by Artist Sardar Sobha Singh.

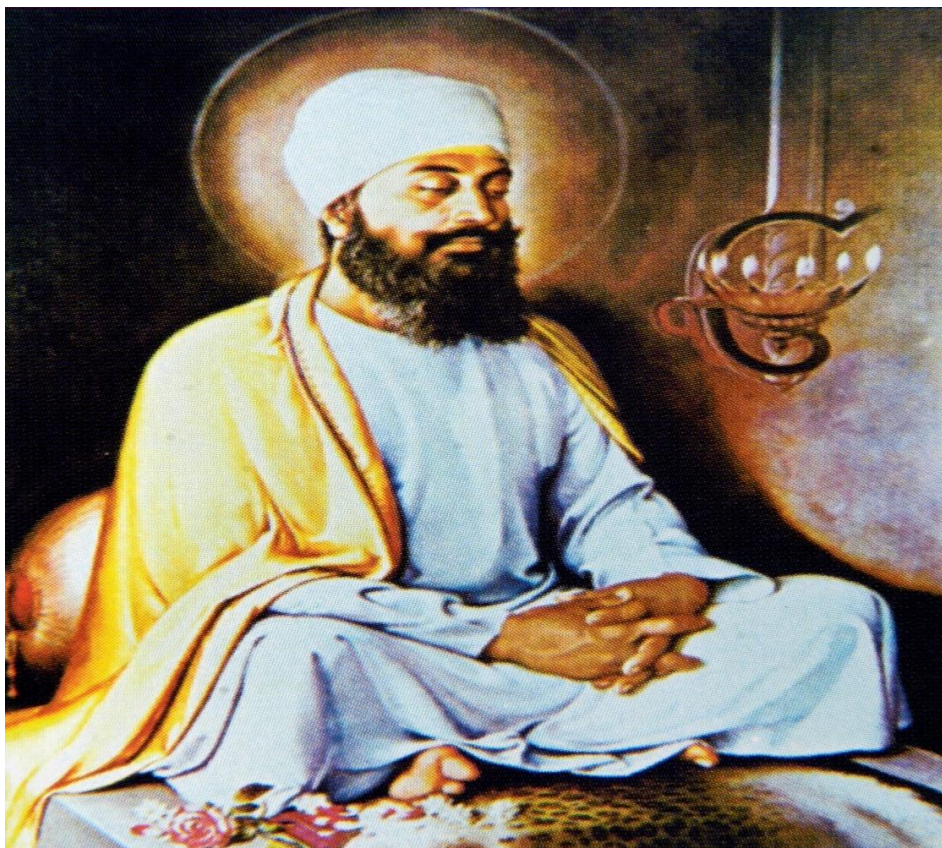


Plate 2: *Guru Ladho Re* by Artist Master Gurdit Singh.

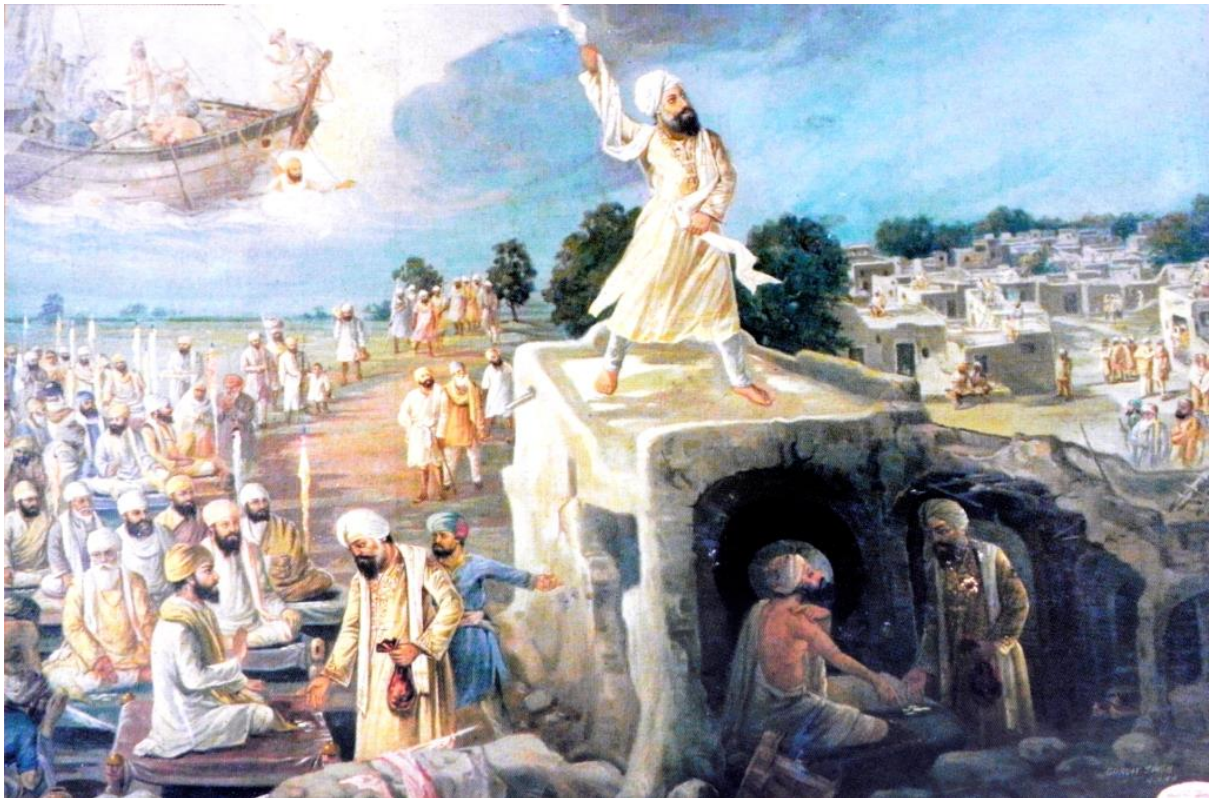


Plate 3: Kashmiri Pandits meeting Guru Tegh Bahadur ji at Sri Anandpur Sahib by Artist G.S. Sohan Singh.



Plate 4: Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur in Spiked Cage by Artist Jaswant Singh.



Plate 5: *Hind Ki Chaddar* by Artist Sardar Kirpal Singh



Plate 6: *Martyrdom of Bhai Mati Dass* by Artist Sardar Kirpal Singh.

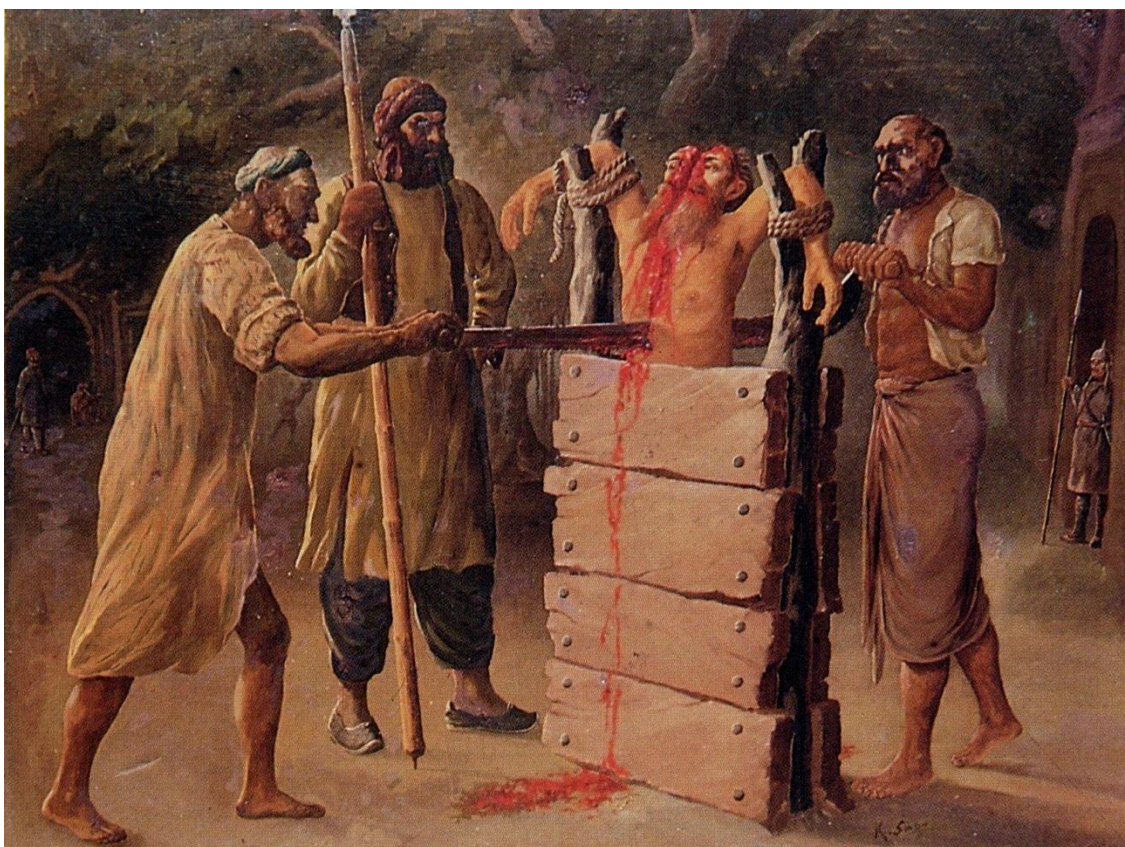


Plate 7: Martyrdom of Bhai Dyala by Artist Gurdit Singh.



Plate 8: Martyrdom of Bhai Sati Dass by Artist Sardar Kirpal Singh.

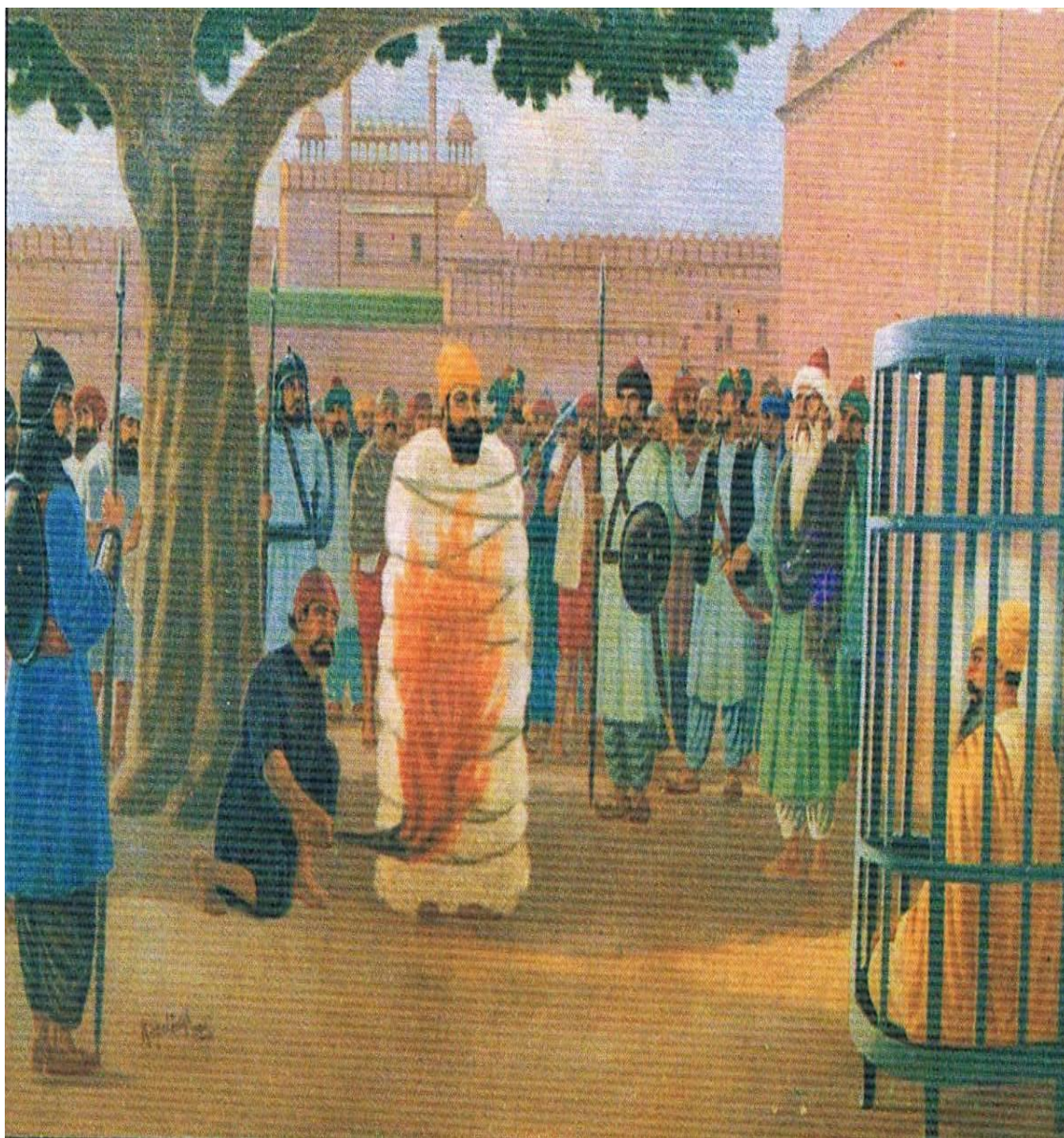


Plate 9: Bhai Jaita carrying the holy head of Guru Tegh Bahadur by Artist Trilok Singh Chitrakar



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