

## *Study of Shared Heritage Through Frescoes on the Walls of Dera Baba Bir Singh*

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the shared heritage related to the traditions of Hinduism and Sikhism in the state of the Punjab, India. The coexistence or the intermingling of cultures has been preserved through the beautiful murals which adorn the walls of a shrine known as Gurudwara of Baba Bir Singh. The Gurudwara is located in the Naurangabad village on the Taran Taran-Goindwal Road in Punjab. This shrine was established by Baba Bir Singh (1764-1844). He was a pious saint and hundreds of devotees flocked his shrine on a daily basis to hear him preach the teachings of the Bhagats and the Gurus and the teachings from the Guru Granth Sahib. Enrolled in the army of the Maharaja Ranjit Singh, he took his dismissal and started to preach the religious tenets. The existence of murals makes this shrine very unique. The murals in the shrine fall in the category of Fresco since the paintings have been executed upon freshly laid wet lime plaster. Water is used as the vehicle for the dry-powder pigment to merge with the plaster, and with the setting of the plaster, the painting becomes an integral part of the wall. The frescoes are divided into the categories of Hinduism which is represented through the themes of the Puranas and the Ramayana and Sikhism which finds a visual representation through the Sikh Gurus. They are a medium to bring together the shared cultures which are also propagated through texts, oral cultures and visual flux.

Keywords: Baba Bir Singh, Frescoes, Murals, Heritage, Punjab, Culture

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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores the beautiful frescoes which adorn the walls of the Samadh of Baba Bir Singh in Naurangabad, located in Taran-Taran in the Amritsar district of the Punjab. This study aims at endorsing the idea of a shared heritage and culture which have been respected and followed by the people who are from the Punjab. The dera of Baba Bir Singh at Naurangabad was the dera (type of socio-religious organization in northern India) of one of the most notable saints from the Punjab. Born in the village of Gaggobua in district Amritsar.

## 2. Baba Bir Singh

He started his journey as a soldier in the army of the greatest ruler of the Punjab, the Sher-e-Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. His Lahore court and darbar was the epicentre of all the activities in the Punjab. Baba Bir Singh was a part of some of the most important conquests which were carried out under the Maharaja's reign (some notable ones being at Kashmir and Peshawar). Eventually Baba Bir Singh or Babaji as he was more fondly called took leave from the army and decided to dedicate his life to the growth and the spread of Gurumat.



Figure 1: Baba Bir Singh

Sometime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there came a time when this dera [1] came to be as prominent as the city of Lahore. The dera is located in the village of Naurangabad and it lies to the south east of Taran-Taran. The dera came to be blessed by a trio of the three of the most notable saints namely Baba Bir Singh, Bhai Maharaj Singh, and Bhai Khuda Singh.

It has also been estimated that around 4,500 people were fed langar every day at this dera. A langar is a holy meal and the practice of serving this to the followers was introduced by the third Guru, Guru Amr Das. The Punjab during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh witnessed a glorious period and Baba Bir Singh had in fact witnessed it all. It was with the passing of the maharaja that Punjab plunged in dark times. There were quick successions and there were also conspiracies being hatched. The transfer of power was in not so able hands and from among these power-hungry people emerged a man Hira Singh Dogra. He was a part of the Lahore durbar and was also the Prime Minister.

The time saw some of the most prominent Sikh courtiers taking refuge with Baba Bir Singh at his fort at Naurangabad. These comprised the two surviving sons of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Prince Kashmira Singh and Prince Pashaura Singh. They were joined by Atar Singh Sandhanwalia and Jawahir Singh Nalwa (he was the son of Hari Singh Nalwa). The passage of time saw the Baba gather a volunteer army, which consisted of 1200 musket men and 3000 horse attendants.

The Dogra chief, the prime minister, took this as a challenge and threat to his position. It was then they decided to attack the fort. Their main aim in doing so they had planned on subduing Baba Bir Singh. The seat of the Baba became the centre of revolt against the Dogra dominance in the Punjab. Hira Singh Dogra on his part dispatched 20,000 men and 50 guns for attacking the fort at Naurangabad. Their intention in doing so was also to capture the two princes, Kahmira Singh and Pashaura Singh. He instigated his army by saying that the Baba had been joined by Atar Singh and this meant that they were joining forces with the British. This led to the army laying siege on the fort or his place of residence on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1844.

The followers at the fort were encouraged to carry out the preparations for the langar and that was to consist of Daal, Parshadey, Kheer and Degh. The followers were also instructed to sing the Gurbani and the Baba himself immersed himself in meditation while being in the presence of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The followers of the Baba were instructed to not retaliate as the attackers were their own brethren. The Guru and many of his disciples were killed in the attack. The force had been led by General Court and his army referred to him as the Guru Maar or the killer of the Guru. Hira Singh Dogra tried to flee Lahore with 4,000 of his most trusted men, but he eventually paid the price with his own life. He was killed by Sham Singh Attariwala and Jawahar Singh on 21<sup>st</sup> December 1844.

This brief description of Baba Bir Singh of Naurangabad helps one in appreciating the compassion, quality of soul and head. After having introduced Baba Bir Singh, it's time to explore and explain the beautiful and precious murals & frescoes.

### **3. Frescos and Murals in The Dera**

**Mural:** is any piece of graphic artwork that is painted or applied directly to a wall, ceiling or other permanent substrate. Mural techniques include fresco, mosaic, graffiti and marouflage [2][3].

**Fresco:** Fresco (plural frescos or frescoes) is a technique of mural painting executed upon freshly laid wet lime plaster. Water is used as the vehicle for the dry-powder pigment to merge with the plaster, and with the setting of the plaster, the painting becomes an integral part of the wall. The type of art on the walls and ceiling of the Dera of Baba Bir Singh fall in the category of Frescoes.

A large collection of ancient paintings and also one of the oldest paintings of India can be seen at this dera. There are frescoes in the dera which are based on the themes of Ramayana, Shri Krishna, Bhagwat Gita, Saint Kabir and Guru Nanak.

#### **3.1 God Hanuman**

The legendary Valmiki wrote the Ramayana. It has 24,000 couplets, 48,000 lines. The text focuses on the supreme deity Shri Vishnu in his avatar of Rama. It has the honour of being

called the first poem of Sanskrit literature. One of the most popular versions which are available today are by Maharishi Valmiki and Sant Tulsidas which is called 'Ramcharitramanas'. The Ramayana is divided into seven khandas (sections). One of the primary characters who have played a pivotal role in the Ramayana is the God Hanuman (Figure 2).

Hanuman is one of the most popular Gods in the Hindu pantheons. His role as the companion and firm devotee of lord Ram has been beautifully highlighted in the epic of the Ramayana. Born to Anjini and the king of the monkeys 'Kesari' he was also after his mother known as Anjaneya. There are a number of stories which are associated with him. One of the most popular ones being of him leaping into the sky to grab the sun as he confused it to be a delicious yellow mango.

Anjani would fetch fruits for him every morning which he would devour with a lot of happiness. This one time when his mother was away, he woke up hungry and looking at the rising sun, he leapt towards it and decided to enjoy the fruit. The king of the Gods Indra, saw him coming and he decided to chase him away while he was seated on his elephant, the four headed Airavat elephant.



Figure 2: The God Hanuman

In this chase he was injured with Indra's weapon the 'vajra' and that is the reason he is called Bajrang Bali (this implies that the God is as strong and powerful as the vajra of Indra). He was rescued by the God of wind who in turn locked himself with Hanuman in a cave which led to the earth being without wind. The earth became devoid of wind and the Gods pleaded with the God of wind to start flowing again. This then led the Gods to grant boons to Anjaneya and he became all powerful and strong.

As the devotee of lord Ram his obeisance is worth quoting. As an ardent believer of Lord Ram, he did everything he could to support his master. From inquiring about Ram's wife Sita, who had been abducted by Ravana (the king of Lanka) to actually fighting in the battle,

he was always there with his master. There was also this one time when he had acquired the Sanjeevini Booti to cure Ram's younger brother Lakshman. He had gotten the whole mountain on which the booti was to be found.

His devotion and submission are inspirational and the Hanuman Chalisa which has 40 couplets and is dedicated to him is said to have powers which cure people from illness and help them deal with their problems.

### 3.2 Raja Janak

Another very important personality from the Ramayana is Raja Janak (Figure 3). He was the father of Mata Sita who was the wife of the prince of Ayodhya (the son of king Dashrath) and her husband Ram eventually went on to become the king of Ayodhya. Raja Janak is also referred to as Karm Yogi. Raja Janak's actual name was Sirdhavaja.

There was a time when he did not have any offspring. It was then that he discovered a girl, from among the ploughed fields. He had a desire that he wanted to bring her up as his own. There was then a celestial voice which helped him in sealing his decision.



Figure 3: Raja Janak

The father and daughter shared a beautiful relationship and this is why Sita was also referred to as Janaki. The city of Janakpur in Nepal is also named after him. Raja Janak also is a fit example of the idea of living with detachment while living in this world.

### 3.3 Samundra Manthan

The painting under study is a depiction from an episode that finds a mention in some of the most important Puranas notably, the Bhagavata Purana [4], the Vishnu Purana. The Bhagavata Purana has over 18,000 Sanskrit verses and is divided into twelve large sections of books. The fresco is being discussed below:

Once Indra the king of God's, came across a sage by the name of Durvasa. The sage offered him a garland which he accepted. But he put the garland on the trunk of the elephant on which he was riding. The fragrance of the garland was irritating for the elephant and he threw it on the ground and stamped his foot on it. This enraged the rishi as this garland was to be treated as prasada as it was the dwelling of Sri (fortune). The sage Durvasa was famous all over for his cursing. He cursed Indra and all the Devas (Gods) to be bereft of all their strength, energy and fortune.

In the battles which followed this episode, the Devas were defeated and the demons or Asuras who were led by King Bali gained control of the universe. It was now that the gods turned to Lord Brahma, who's the creator. He is said to be a God who has the capability of giving specific boons. He directed them to his counterpart in the trinity namely Lord Vishnu. On his advice the gods extended a hand of friendship towards the demons, and once they have secured the semblance of friendship, both the groups should go ahead and churn the ocean. This was to be done so as to achieve the nectar of immortality or Amrit.



Figure 4: Samudra Manthan

The two groups of the devas and the demons got together and on Lord Shiva's advice they made the 'Mandar Parvat' as the churning rod and the serpent Vasuki, which Siva wears as an ornament around his neck was used as the rope. The mountain of Mandar is symbolic of

our mind (manas). Its stability according to thinkers represents the determination of our resolve.

The next problem to emerge in front of the gods and the demons was that the mountain was unstable and it was sinking in the ocean. It was then that Lord Brahma mentioned to Lord Vishnu that the time had come for him to take the *Kurma* avatar, which is his second incarnation. He took the form of a turtle and the entire weight of the mountain was balanced on its back. The tortoise here represents the state of Sadhna where all sense organs are withdrawn and it is with such support that the mind progresses in Sadhna. Vasuki symbolizes desire and its slumber indicates that only when all our desires go to sleep, can any spiritual progress be said to have really begun. Now the churning process was to commence.

Vishnu accompanied by the gods walked towards the serpent's mouth. An interesting and a very important observation to be made here is that, Lord Vishnu was bearing the weight of the mountain in the form of his avatar and was also leading the Gods. Suresh Narain and B. K. Chaturvedi in their book, '*The Diamond Book of Hindu Gods and Goddesses*' [5], while discussing Lord Ganesha mentions that Vishnu's incarnation does not mean that he ceases to exist in his normal manifestation. He can co-exist at several places and in several forms.

However, on the insistence of the demons the gods took the end of the serpent and the demons took the mouth. The churning of the ocean resulted in some poisonous fumes issuing from Vasuki's nostrils. From amongst the products that came out from the churning of the ocean, the first was the hot and deadly poison Halahala. Seeing this the gods and the demons were getting restless and it was then that Lord Shiva came to their rescue. He took the poison in his palms and drank it. With him the snakes also took part of the poison and it was then that he blessed the snakes that from that time forward their worship will also be his. It was then that his consort Parvati, stepped into the water to stop the poison from going down his throat. The Halahala resembled a blue ornament and it was now that Lord Brahma said that from now on Shiva will also be referred to as Neel-Kanth. Parvati's stopping the poison in his throat was an indication towards a wife's love and also because Narayana or Vishnu resides in Shiva's heart [6].

Shiva's partaking of the poison finds a mention in the Bhagavata Purana: 'Compassionate ones generally undertake a lot of trouble to relieve the others of their suffering. However, this is no pain at all, because reliving others of their suffering is the highest worship of God.' The next to emerge was Kamdhenu. This cow is known for providing necessary materials for Vedic sacrifices (milk, ghee etc.). Then came the beautiful horse Vachaihsravasand, it was radiant like the white moon. The next to come from the churning was Airavat, the majestic elephant. As the demons had already taken the horse, it was now the turn of the Gods to procure an item and so Indra, the king of Gods, took Airavat as his vehicle. The next to emerge from the churning was the jewel of pure consciousness and it was Kaustubha. Thereafter came the wish fulfilling tree of Parijat. The sources like the Puranas which mention Lord Shiva's story have mentioned that it was through this wish fulfilling tree that Parvati had got her daughter Ashoksundari.

Then the most beautiful and talented women also known as the Apsaras emerged from the churning. Vishvakarma gave them splendid ornaments and Lord Brahma a lotus. The next to emerge from the churning of the ocean was Goddess Lakshmi. Her coming endowed the gods and everyone present with all their material wealth. She on her part chose Lord Vishnu as her consort. Next emerged a girl with lotus eyes. She was Varuni and was taken by the demons.

The last one to appear was Dhanvantari, the founder of Ayurveda. In his hand he had a vase brimming with the nectar of immortality. The texts mention that as soon as the demons saw this vase, they broke the agreement of equally dividing all products. They took it from Dhanvantari and began quarrelling amongst themselves as to who would drink it first. They are said to have taken it away and fought amongst themselves and the Gods having no alternative then again approached Lord Vishnu for assistance.

It was then that Lord Vishnu took the form of Mohini. She was a beautiful woman and the demons on seeing her momentarily forgot about their arguments. She asked the two groups to assemble in a big hall. They were made to sit in two rows. She began feeding the nectar or *amrit* to the Gods first. The demon Rahu however disguised himself as a God and seated himself between the gods of Sun and Moon. His partaking of the amrit exposed him and Lord Vishnu immediately cut his head with a discus or Sudarshana Chakra. The torso where the amrit had not reached fell to the ground and his head became immortal. The head came to be called Rahu. The torso later due to a boon came to be called Ketu.

### 3.4 Saint Kabir

Known for pioneering the unique saint tradition in India, Kabir lived in the fifteenth century. Kabir was one of the most famous disciples of the popular saint poet Ramananda. According to K. S. Narang [7], he was born in 1398, and there has been a controversy over whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim. There are different traditions which have been associated with his birth. His boyhood days were spent in Banaras. His time was devoted towards the chanting of the name of Rama. He was married to Loi (who also finds a depiction in this particular fresco) and she bore him two children Kamal and Kamli. He condemned the evils of the caste system, the rituals, the dogmas, pilgrimages etc. He asked his followers to purify their minds and he preached that God is not found in the temples. He is omnipresent and can be viewed with the purity of one's heart.



Figure 5: Fresco showing Kabir and his wife Mata Loi



Mai Loi and Kabir in Figure 5 are shown weaving. She is spinning on a charkha and they are spinning the cloth material of Khadi.

A living legend of spiritual achievement and social renaissance he hailed from the Julaha community. That was his occupation and with it he fended for himself and his family. Kabir is often referred to as saint, but he as M D Thomas in Sufism and Bhakti Movement Eternal Relevance [8] has written was not a traditional saint who lived on the mercy of the others around him.

### 3.5 Baba Nanak

The fresco (Figure 6) is a visual depiction of Baba Nanak and his followers. Seated in between in the yellow-coloured robe is Baba Nanak. His white beard is a classic indication towards his later years as a preacher at Kartarpur. That was a town which he had set up along with his family and it was there that the tradition of langar had actually started. Baba Nanak, one learns that he was married to Mata Sulakhni who was the daughter of Moolchand Khatri who was from the village of Pakhore near Gurdaspur. Soon after they got married, they were blessed with their elder son who was Baba Sri Chand and then they had their second son Lakshmi Das.

Nanak had taken up occupation in Sultanpur which was his sister's married home and it was there that he was working for the nawab and he had had an encounter with the divine. It was while he had gone for his morning ablutions that he had a call from God and that divine revelation changed the course of his life. This fresco also indicates a man holding a musical instrument which is the Rubab. The man holding it is Guru Nanak's most trusted companion Bhai Mardana. He was the Guru's friend from his hometown of Talwandi and he had joined Nanak at Sultanpur. He gave the tunes to his compositions and those made the followers get attracted towards them.

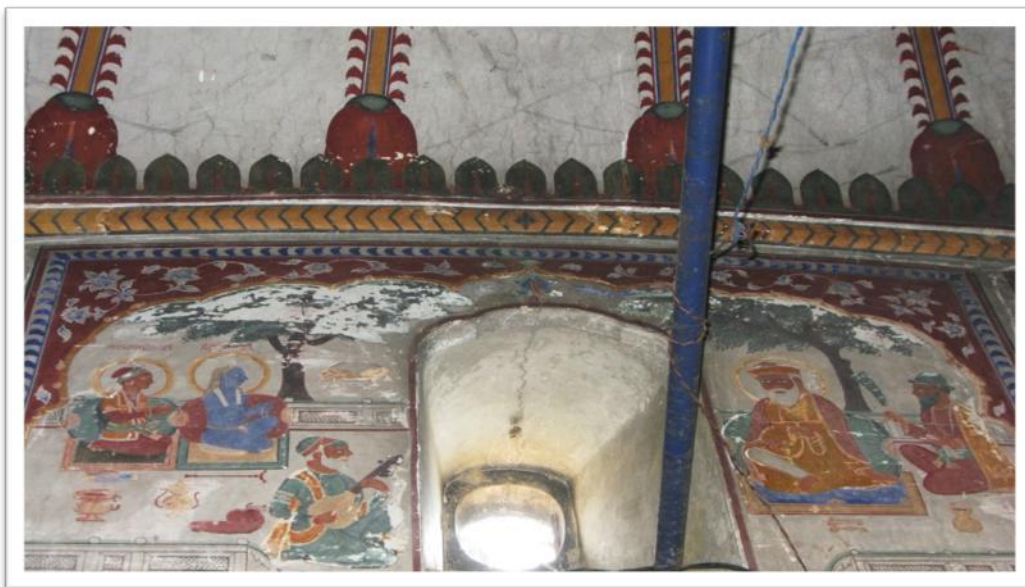


Figure 6: Guru Nanak Dev's Sabha

The man sitting behind Baba Nanak is Bhai Bala. He was another trusted companion of the Guru. A Hindu Jat, he accompanied Baba Nanak and Bhai Mardana on their travels. He finds

a mention in a Janam Sakhi (the texts dedicated to the life and teachings of Guru Nanak) which is dedicated in his name and is called the 'Bhai Bala Janam Sakhi'. The Janam Sakhi mentioned that he travelled with the duo all over India and died at Khadur Sahib sometime in his late seventies in the year 1544.

The fresco also shows a man who is sitting across from the Guru and is only wearing a loin cloth which covers the lower part of his body. That is the artist's imagination of the Guru in conversation with his elder son Baba Sri Chand (1494-1643). He was a deeply spiritual man and upon his father's return to Kartarpur he made it evident to Baba Nanak that although he was deeply spiritual his inclination was deeply rooted in the traditions of the yogis. The father was well aware that his son would tread on the path of the yogis and that he himself would become an ascetic. As is known the Guru chose Guru Angad (formerly Bhai Lehna). The primary reason for this was also his son's inclination towards extreme asceticism. Baba Sri Chand did take up that journey and went on to lay the foundation for his sect which came to be called the Udasi sect. Udasi refers to a 'detached journey.'

### **3.6 Guru Amardas and Guru Ramdas**

This fresco is the imagination of the artist about the third Sikh Guru, Guru Amar Das (5th May 1479-1st September 1574) and his successor, the fourth Guru, Guru Ram Das (24th September 1534-1st September 1581). They were also related as father-in-law and son-in-law respectively. Guru Ram Das was married to the daughter of Guru Amar Das, Bibi Bhani. Guru Amar Das had chosen Ram Das (he was formerly known as Bhai Jetha) and how this alliance was fixed and what their beautiful relationship between a Guru and a devotee and a future successor was all about is being discussed below.

Born in 1534 in Lahore to Hari Das and Anup Devi, Ram Das was a boy who had many striking similarities with the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak. As a young boy he sought the company of holy men and he also knew the shlokas by heart [9]. Guru Ram das was a seller of parched grams and he is also said to be an orphan, who lost his parents at the age of seven and was brought up by his maternal grandmother (who got him to Basarke, where he came in contact with the third Guru. There are other sources which mention that he was brought up in a well-known neighbourhood of Lahore called the Chuna Mandi.

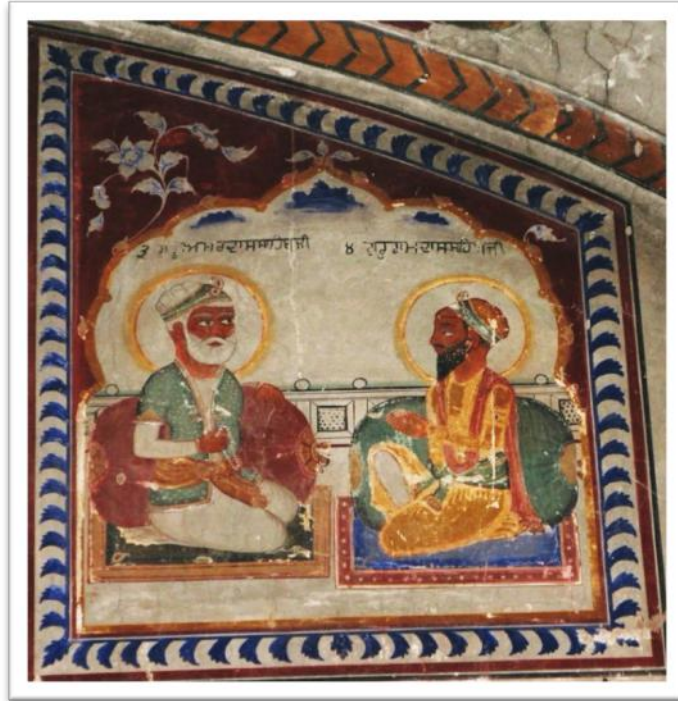


Figure 7: The third Sikh Guru Amar Das and the fourth Sikh Guru Ram Das in conversation.

The third Guru's popularity was soaring and he came to have many followers in Lahore as well. Once there was a jatha (group of people) who were going to Goindwal to seek the blessings of Guru Amar Das. The people had shared with Jetha about the great dera. The devotees who came to the dera, eventually left but Jetha stayed back.

It was while he was there, that the Guru's youngest daughter Bibi Bhani became of a marriageable age. Her mother and the Guru's wife, Mata Mansa Devi was at that time hoping to find a suitable match for their daughter, and it was during once such conversation with the third Guru, that he had suggested the name of Jetha as a suitable match for their daughter. Guru Amar Das asked him to travel back to Lahore, and seek the permission of his parents. Bibi Bhani and Bhai Jetha were then married. Post his wedding also, he continued to serve the Guru selflessly and tirelessly. Jetha was also deputized to be a representative of the Guru at the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar [10].

Guru Ram Das was made the fourth Guru in 1574 and he was a Guru for seven years. and it was during his reign as a Guru that he founded and strengthened the Manji system. He regulated the collection from the offerings and for this purpose he appointed territorial deputies who were known as masands. He composed some of the most important hymns and some of them were exclusively for the marriage and childbirth rituals. The pre wedding ceremonies he composed were called the 'ghorian' as he felt that the rustic folklores which people sang earlier were not suitable for the Sikhs. He was also the composer of the marriage rites which are called 'lavan' and those have been composed in 'Raag Suhi'. Another contribution of the Guru was his hard work in bridging the gap between the elder son of Guru Nanak, Baba Sri Chand (the founder of the Udasi tradition, a religious sect of ascetic sadhus centred in northern India) and the Sikhs.

#### **4. Conclusions**

1. The mural paintings in dera of Baba Bir Singh have been made using a technique that qualifies them to be called frescoes.
2. The technique of visual flux has been used for preserving historical facts.
3. Some of the precious murals in the dera have been studied and the related historical facts contained in each of the frescoes have been interpreted.
4. The interpretation of frescoes establishes the fact that the technique of visual flux is a very powerful way of preserving history.
5. The close examination of the frescoes indicates that these are based on the Pahari School of Art (Paintings which originated in the hill states of India).
6. The frescoes discussed in this paper belong to the themes of Ramayana, Puranas, Guru Nanak Dev etc.
7. The interpretation compares well with the written material available elsewhere and the orally available account of the events.
8. The biggest advantage of preserving the facts of history through murals is that it provides space for individual interpretations while written texts are always rigid.

#### **Acknowledgement**

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