

Precious Murals in the Religious Building of Pothimala, District Ferozpur, Punjab, India

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Abstract

This paper discusses the precious murals in the religious building of Pothimala. Pothimala Building is situated in the village Guru Har Sahai in Ferozpur District of Punjab India. The study and interpretation endorse the philosophy of shared religious traditions followed and respected by the people of Punjab. The foundation of this building was laid by Guru Jivan Mal (7th direct descendent of Guru Ram Das, the 4th Sikh Guru) in 1745. The Pothimala building derives its name from the fact that Guru Nanak Dev's personal Pothe (handwritten scripture) and Mala (rosary) is housed in this religious building. The murals in Pothimala 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 can be divided into the three categories of Hindu, Sikh and Folk Tales. The Hindu frescoes are further divided into the themes of Ramayana, Bhagwat Gita and Mahabharat. The Sikh frescoes are mainly on the themes of Gurus. The folk themes of frescoes are "Heer-Ranjha" and "Soni-Mahiwal". The study and analysis of frescoes dovetails well with the existing history available in three formats (written, oral transmission from generation to generation and visual flux) and prevalent cultures in the state of the Punjab.

Keywords: Pothimala, Frescoes, Folk Tales, Punjab, Culture

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1.0 Introduction

This paper explores the beautiful and precious frescoes which adorn the interior walls of a hall in the Pothimala building. These frescoes are a representation of the shared religious traditions of Punjab. Pothimala Building is situated in the village of Guru Har Sahai in Ferozpur District of Punjab; India^{1,2,3}. The foundation of the village Guru Har Sahai and this building was laid by Guru Jivan Mal Sodhi (7th direct descendant of the 4th Sikh Guru, Guru Ram Das; 1534-1581) in 1745. Guru Jivan Mal Sodhi was the 6th direct descendant of Guru Prithi Chand (1558-1618); the elder brother of the 5th Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan Dev (1563-1606). The village of Guru Har Sahai is named after the elder son of Guru Jivan Mal Sodhi. The Sodhis of Guru Har Sahai have the ownership and administrative control of Guru Har Sahai and the Pothimala building.



Figure-1.1: Location of Village Guru Har Sahai, District Ferozpur⁴, Punjab, India



Figure-1.2: Pothimala Building at Guru Har Sahai, District Ferozpur^{4,5,6,7}, Punjab, India

It derives its name from the fact that the personal belongings 'Pothe' (handwritten scripture) and Mala (rosary) of Guru Nanak Dev, the first celebrated Sikh Guru, are housed in this religious place / building^{1,4,5,6,7}. The other original personal belongings of Guru Nanak Dev as claimed by the Sodhi family of Guru Har Sahai and as per the official website^{6,7} of the Pothimala are 'Padam', 'Saligram' and the 'Topi' (Cap)^{1,5,6,7}. The Padam is a priceless jewel in which the image of Guru Nanak Dev is visible & his right foot's thumb print is also visible. Saligram is a fossilized shell used in South Asia as an iconic symbol representing the Hindu God Vishnu and universally followed by Hindus of Vaishnavite and Smarta sects⁸.

A sub sect in Sikhism venerates Guru Prithi Chand as their religious leader or Guru. This group Viz-a-Viz mainstream Sikh theology is different because it follows a line of Guruship that is independent of the mainstream Sikh belief and practice. This building has been the official residence of the eldest son of the descendants of Guru Prithi Chand. The eldest son is the Gaddi Nashin (Seat of spiritual leader) and holds the title of Guru and inherits the entire property of Pothimala as per the family tradition^{9,10,11}.

2.0 Intermingling Of Religious Cultures

The blessed land of the Punjab has had followers from the three major religious identities of Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam. The building of Pothimala is an example of multi-religious

identities coming together for worship. The description of frescoes adorning the walls of a serene Pothimala building establishes this fact.

3.0 Guru Prithi Chand And Guru Har Sahai

Prithi Chand was the eldest son of the 4th Sikh Guru Ram Das. It is a historically known fact that Prithi Chand refused to accept his younger brother Arjan Dev as the lawful Guru and the successor of his father Guru Ram Das's (1534-1581) Gaddi (seat). He however could not pose a viable threat to Guru Arjan's authority at Amritsar. He moved to the village of Hehar near Lahore. There he constructed a temple, a pool and officially established his Gaddi¹⁶. The 1630's saw the forced evacuation of the Sikhs from the Durbar Sahib, the central seat of Sikh authority at Amritsar by Guru Prithi Chand's son Miharvan. The 6th Guru, Guru Hargobind (1595-1644) was the Guru of the mainstream Sikhs during the period. The crises within the family started with the death of Miharvan (d.1696). His death saw the struggle for succession between his three sons and it was then that in 1698 that they were evacuated from the Darbar sahib. In the last quarter of the eighteenth-century Guru Har Sahai's son Ajit Singh (d.1813), worked out a close relation with the main stream Sikhs. This provided him with an opportunity to expand the family influence with the larger Sikh community.

Pothi Mala, the three-hundred-year-old building, besides being the residence of the descendants of Guru Ram Das, the building is a haven to the rather unexplored holy relics of Guru Nanak Dev, the first Sikh Guru. The original Pothi was stolen during the lifetime of Guru Jaswant Singh Sodhi (the 14th descendant of Guru Ram Das). Nevertheless, along with the remaining holy relics and the crumbling heritage building, stood tall the followers' undaunted faith in the mystical powers of the Guru Gaddi (Seat of Spiritual Leader), at the Pothimala where followers travelled long distances for the privilege of seeing the revered relics.

4.0 Relics Of Guru Nanak Dev

Pothimala building has priceless and precious personal belongings of the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak Dev. The Relics of Guru Nanak Dev the 1st Sikh Guru that have descended in the family of Sodhis of Guru Har Sahai are as follows:

1. The Original Pothi (scripture) of Guru Nanak.
2. The original Mala (Rosary) of Guru Nanak.
3. The Original Topi (Cap) of Guru Nanak.
4. The Padam (Priceless Jewel) in which the image of Guru Nanak Dev and his right foot thumb print is visible.
5. The Saligram which has sixteen circles around it and originally belonged to Guru Nanak.
6. A Small Pothi that also descended in this family.
7. A gold coin of Bhagwan (God) Krishna.

Some of these relics are shown in the following Figures^{1,4,5,6,7}.







	
<p>The original Pothi (Handwritten Scripture) & Mala (Rosary), Padam and Saligram.</p>	<p>A page from the original Pothi (scripture).</p>
 <p>The Topi (Cap)</p>	 <p>The Padam, The Saligram & one Rudraksh bead & Bead of Gold from the original Mala of Guru Nanak Dev.</p>
	
<p>Padam, the priceless jewel in which the image of Guru Nanak is visible & his right foot thumb print is also visible.</p>	<p>Saligram which has 16 circles around it and originally belonged to Guru Nanak Dev.</p>

Figure-4.1: Priceless and precious personal belongings of the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak Dev^{6,7}.

The Topi (Cap) is made of very fine silk and due to age is torn in some places. Few generations ago it was sewn inside an outer casing so as to protect the original Topi. This Topi is kept along with the other relics in the Pothimala Building at Guru Har Sahai. It is a custom that the Gaddi Nashin of Pothimala wears this Topi on New Sambat day every year when the Relics of Guru Nanak Dev are displayed for darshans by the devotees at Pothimala during the annual Mela (Carnival). Padam-The priceless jewel in which the image of Guru Nanak and his right foot thumb print is visible.

Pothi-What makes this Pothi so unique is that the hymns of Baba Nanak which have been recorded were the only ones which were available and were duly recorded. The Pothi has two sections. One deals with the hymns of Guru Nanak and the other with the hymns of Guru Amardas and Guru Ramdas.

5.0 Murals In Pothimala

5.1 Mural

Mural: 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.

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 wall¹⁶. The type of art on the walls and ceiling of Pothimala building falls in the category of Frescoes.

A large collection of ancient paintings and also one of the oldest paintings of India can be seen at Pothimala. There are over eighty frescoes in the Pothimala building and they are based on the themes of Ramayana, Shri Krishna, Bhagwat Gita, Guru Nanak and Folk tales.

5.2 Frescoes On The Theme Of Ramayana

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 honor 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 kandas (sections). The fresco under study falls under the category of the second kanda, i.e. The 'Ayodhya Kand'.

5.2.1 Shri Rama, Sita And Lakshmana During Vanwas (Exile)



Figure-5.2.1: Fresco at Pothimala showing Shri Rama, Sita and Lakshmana during vanwas.

This fresco depicts Shri Rama with his younger brother and his wife in the forest during their exile or 'Vanwas'. Sita is shown wearing a Ghagra-Choli. Popular iconography shows her wearing a clothing which is referred to as a saree. She is also shown to be wearing jewelry

(nose ring, earrings). On her right is her husband Rama who has been painted in blue complexion owing to him being an incarnation of Vishnu and on her left is Lakshman. Their clothing and headgear are of leaves. They also have bows and arrows on their person since they were Kshatriyas.

5.2.2 Sita Haran

The fresco (Figure-5.2) falls in the third Kand, which is more popularly known as the 'Aranya Kand' or the book of the forest. While they were in the forest Rama, Sita and Lakshman set up their hut on the banks of the river Godawari.



Figure-5.2.2: Fresco at Pothimala depicting Sita Haran (Abduction)

Ravan wanted revenge for the humiliation of his sister Shrupnakha. The top part of the painting visually depicts the part where the demon Maricha assumed the form of a golden deer. Upon seeing the deer Sita became entranced by the deer and pleaded with Rama to capture the deer. He left for the hunt leaving her under the care of his brother. He cast his arrow which pierced through his heart. This led to the illusory guide fading away and Maricha appeared in front of Rama in his hideous form. Maricha in his last breath cried out for Sita in an imitation of Ram's voice "Sita! Lakshman! Help Me! Upon hearing the cry for help Sita became anxious and pleaded with Lakshman for assistance. He agreed to Sita's wishes and left to look for Rama. Before leaving he drew a boundary line which is referred to as the Lakshman Rekha.

The top part depicts Rama and Lakshman out for a hunt. Rama has been painted in the color Blue and he and Lakshman are dressed in the garb of tribal men wearing a headgear of leaves and the middle part of their body is also covered with leaves. The lower part of the painting shows Ravana dressed as an ascetic asking for alms from Sita. The Lakshman Rekha was symbolic of Lakshman. That is precisely why he asked her to step out from behind the demarcated line. It was only then that he assumed the form of the fearful Ravana and it was then that he abducted her.

Sita is wearing a Ghagra-Choli and her body is adorned with jewellery. Only Ravana's depiction is similar to the one which we find in the narrative. He is described as an ascetic who comes to abduct Sita and here also, he is depicted as an ascetic only.

5.3 Frescoes On The Theme of Bhagwan Shri Krishna

5.3.1 Marriage Ceremony of Shri Krishna

This painting covers a large part of the wall when a devotee or visitor enters the upper floor of the building and is located at the end of the room which houses the holy relics.



Figure-5.3.1: Marriage ceremony of Lord Krishna

The wedding guests are the Holy trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (Lord Shiva). Their role in the Hindu pantheon is a very important one and their roles are of creator, sustainer and destroyer respectively. Along with them in attendance is Lord Ganesh.

Lord Shiva in this painting has been depicted with his third eye on his forehead. He is depicted in his ascetic avatar. There is only a cloth which covers the lower part of his body. Seated next to him is the creator, Lord Brahma. He however has four heads and the four Vedas have emerged from it. Popular iconography shows him seated on a lotus and he is an old man. Lord Vishnu and Lord Krishna have been painted together. Lord Vishnu is holding his shankh or conch and they both have been painted blue in colour.

The remaining wedding guests in attendance closely resemble rulers and kings and their head gears are indicative of the same. They are all shown wearing Mukuts (crowns). The women folk are primarily seated towards the right of Krishna and they all are dressed in Ghagra Cholis. Their body is adorned with jewellery which ranges from big nose rings to head gear. The women are also shown to be wearing what is called a passa.

5.3.2 Lord Krishna, His Wife Rukmini And Her Brother Rukmi

The second painting is that of Lord Krishna, his wife Rukmini and her brother Rukmi. This is a narration from the Bhagwat Purana. Also known as the Shrimad Bhagwat or simply Bhagwat, it is one of the most loved Puranas. The dates of this Purana are tentative but the scholars have dated it to about 900 CE. Some even believe that it originated in the 10th century. The Bhagwat has over 18,000 verses in Sanskrit and is divided into twelve books.



Figure-5.3.2: Fresco at Pothimala showing Lord Krishna, his wife and his brother in law Rukmi

The Bhagwat narration overall is basically the narration by Suta Goswami who was a renowned sage. He was requested by Shaunak Rishi, who is also referred to as the leader of a thousand sages, to speak on spiritual topics and especially the pastimes of Lord Krishna. Maharishi Ved Vyasa was the compiler of the Bhagwat.

Bhagwat was also the answer to all the questions of King Parikshit who had been cursed to die within seven days. He was the son of Abhimanyu and Uttara and while he was in his mother's womb he had been saved by Lord Krishna. The crowning jewel of the Bhagwat is the tenth book. It deals with the life of Lord Krishna, the supreme lord.

This painting has been painted right above the painting depicting the wedding of Lord Krishna. This said fresco can be divided into three sub parts. The top part is a visual narration of Rukmini praying to Goddess Parvati that Lord Krishna should come and marry her; the middle part shows him whisking away Rukmini on his chariot. The last portion of this fresco is indicative of Lord Krishna's fight with Rukmi.

Being analysed now is the first part of the painting. Rukmini's wedding had been fixed with Shishupal who was the prince of Chedi. This alliance had been fixed by her elder brother Rukmi. She on her part had also set her heart on marrying Lord Krishna. She, to pass on her heart's desire, sent across a letter to Krishna through Brahman. Rukmini also mentions how she wants him to take her away with him and this she suggested should be implemented when she is coming from the temple after offering her prayers to goddess Parvati.

The women folk are dressed in Ghagra Choli and jewellery adorns their bodies. Rukmini is shown offering worship to the goddess. The next part of the fresco is indicative of Lord Krishna whisking her away. The army in the background is led by Balrama who was the elder brother of Lord Krishna. The army which was led by him fought the army consisting of the princes who had assembled for her swayamvar. The bottom most part is indicative of Krishna fighting Rukmi who on his part was hateful towards Krishna. The painting shows the two engaged in a battle in which Rukmi was spared his life as Rukmini pleaded with her husband that her brother's life should be spared. Krishna however disfigured Rukmi.

5.4 Fresco On The Theme Of Guru Nanak Dev

5.4.1 Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of Sikhism and his Sabha

This fresco is a representation of Guru Nanak Dev (the founder of Sikhism) and his Sabha. Guru Nanak has played an integral role in the growth and development of the Sikh faith. He was born in 1469 to Mehta Kalu and his wife Tripta. His elder sister was Bebe Nanaki.



Figure-5.4.1: Guru Nanak Dev's Sabha

The fresco above is a visual depiction of him 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. Looking back at the life and times of Baba Nanak one learns that he was married to Mata Sulakhni and they had two sons Sri Chand and Lakshmi Das.

Nanak had taken up occupation in Sultanpur and he was working for the nawab when he had an encounter with the divine during his morning ablutions. This fresco also indicates a man holding a musical instrument which is the Rubab and he is his trusted companion Bhai Mardana. He was the Guru's friend from his hometown of Talwandi and he had joined Nanak at Sultanpur. Nanak was encouraged by his friend Mardana to sing in public and that became a highlight of his sabhas. At Sultanpur the popularity of the saint grew multi fold and the attendees in the sabhas were both Hindus and Muslims.

Bhai Mardana devoted his entire life to the cause of the Guru's teachings and their propagation. The man sitting behind Baba Nanak is Bhai Bala. A Hindu Jat, he accompanied Baba Nanak and Bhai Mardana on their travels. The Bhai Bala janam sakhi mentions how he 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 deeply spiritual but his inclination was deeply rooted in the traditions of the yogis.

The fresco shows Guru Nanak with a halo around his head and that is to signify his position as a spiritual leader. He is dressed in a tallow choga. The fresco also shows his headgear which was always a cap which was partially covered with a turban. The fresco also depicts his footwear which was what is called a Khadaun or wooden sandals. Bhai Bala is wearing green and Bhai Mardana is wearing white. Baba Sri Chand is aptly depicted as a yogi who is detached from this world.

5.5 Fresco On The Theme Of Folk Tales

5.5.1 Soni and Mahiwal



Figure-5.5.1: Soni and Mahiwal

This fresco is in line with the Sufi idea of worship²¹. Soni (in Punjabi means pretty) was the daughter of a pot maker Tulla. A rich man by the name of Izzat Baig from Uzbekistan; once came to Tulla's house to buy some pottery. He was struck with the pot maker's daughter Soni's beauty and he decided to come repeatedly. The passing of days saw him spending all his fortunes.

It was then that Soni's father decided to hire him as a water buffalo's herder and it was then that he was rechristened as Mahiwal (a man who herds water buffaloes). Soni and Mahiwal were in love but her marriage had already been fixed with a potter who lived nearby. The day of her wedding finally came and she moved into the house of her husband. Mahiwal was distraught and he took up residence opposite Soni's house.

One day while Soni was looking across the river a thought crossed her mind. She thought that with the help of an earthen pot she could stay afloat on the river and cross it to meet her beloved Mahiwal. She in time implemented her scheme to meet Mahiwal. He on seeing her coming used to swim half way through the river and they both used to swim back to the bank.

The meeting of the lovers was discovered by Soni's sister-in-law. On a fateful day she replaced the baked earthen pot with an unbaked one. The next night while Soni was floating on the river her pot began to melt and she called out to Mahiwal for help. Mahiwal had a broken limp but he came to reach out to Soni. His body however could not tolerate the torrent of the water and the lovers together got drowned in the Chenab River.

The painting under study is a visual reflection of this eternal love story. In this Soni is shown floating on the river with the help of a pot while Mahiwal sits waiting. What is striking about this painting is that Soni is not clothed. Her body is adorned with jewellery and the lower part of her body is covered with a cloth.

5.5.2 Heer and Ranjha



Figure-5.5.2: Heer and Ranjha

The presence of the cows, bulls and a couple indicates towards this being the fresco depicting Heer and Ranjha. The man is shown playing a flute. Composed sometime in the fifteenth century by Warris Shah this is the story of Dhido Ranjha and Heer Sayal. Ranjha was the son of a landlord and Heer was the daughter of the head of the Sayal tribe.

They both instantly fell in love and he was hired by Heer as a cowherd for her father's cows. They met on the banks of the Chenab when he took the cows for grazing and their meetings were always in a furtive manner. Their liaisons however are shattered by her uncle Keido. Her family think of Ranjha as a cowherd and they refuse to accept him as a suitor for their daughter. She is forced to marry Siedo Khera but she, being faithful to Ranjha, refuses to accept this alliance.

Her marriage leaves Ranjha distressed and he retreats to a monastery which belongs to the Nath yogi tradition. Once when he was in the guise of a yogi holding a begging bowl, dress and ornaments, he travelled to Rangpur which was Heer's married home. There they (Heer and Ranjha) are helped by her sister-in-law Sehti. They elope to the court of King Adali. The king also supports them and refuses to return her to Seido Khera. The lovers meet their fateful end when they were tricked into believing that they will be married and on this pretext the family kills Heer to protect their honour. Grieve stricken Ranjha also passes away. The fresco at Pothimala depicts cows which indicate Ranjha being a cowherd and his flute indicates towards the music he played for his beloved Heer. In this fresco, his body is adorned with jewels. The depiction of trees indicates their time together along the banks of the Chenab when he took the cows for grazing.

Heer's face is distorted as the frescos have not been preserved too well. From what is left one can see her dressed in a ghagra-choli and some jewellery. She is shown to be holding the feet of an old man and this is a depiction of her requesting her uncle Keido to not reveal their alliance.

5.5.3 Sassi and Punnu



Figure-5.5.3: Fresco showing Sassi and Punnu.

This is one of the epic romances of the pre-partition Punjab and this was written by Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (1689-1752). Of all the seven romances, this story still finds a resonance in the hearts and minds of the people of the land²².

Punnu was the son of a king. A legend also states that she was the daughter of a washerman who had laid out a test for Punnu. He had to wash the clothes which had been given to him. He being the son of a king had never carried out such chores and ended up tearing them. To prove his victory he had put gold coins in the pockets of the garments so that the villagers kept this piece of information to themselves. His brothers do not approve of Sassi as for them she is the daughter of a washerman and is not fit to be the wife of their brother.

Owing to their enmity for Sassi the brothers decided to follow Punnu to Sassi's town and upon reaching the town they realized that their wedding celebrations were in full swing. The brothers pretended to join in the celebrations and entice Punnu to consume different types of liquors. The brothers got him drunk and they took him with them to their hometown of Kicham. Grief stricken, she ran towards the city of Kicham barefoot. She crossed the desert barefoot and this proved to be a hazardous journey for her and this proved to be her end. Punnu on learning of what had befallen his lover was grief stricken himself.

This story finds a representation in a crude form. The camels in the painting are an explanation for it being Sassi and Punnu. They are an indication towards the desert. The viewer can take the woman in the front to be Sassi, as she has been portrayed in a body language which depicts discomfort and she seems to be in a rush and she also seems to be stopped by the lady behind her.

6.0 Conclusions

1. The mural paintings in the Pothimala religious building 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 religious building of Pothimala located in the village Guru Har Sahai, District Ferozpur, Punjab, India 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, Shree Krishna, Mahabharata, Guru Nanak Dev, and the folk stories related to Sohni-Mahiwal, Heer-Ranjha and Sassi-Punnu.
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.

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