

Janam Sakhis- The Splendour of Sikh Miniature Art

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Abstract

Though the canvas of traditional Indian painting is fairly large and magnificent over-flowing with flavours of diverse traditions, cultures, philosophies and ethos yet in the potpourri of vibrant styles and techniques, a style that outshines and emerges as a brilliant and classic benchmark seeped in a deep understanding of aesthetics and poetic parlance is undoubtedly the art of ‘Miniature Painting’.

Keywords: *tradititional, painting, culture*

Introduction

In India, the idea of miniature painting dates back to the era of palm-leaf illustrations and other powerful and mesmerizing illustrative narrations found in manuscripts of Pala and Sena dynasties namely as 'Western School of Manuscript Painting' and 'Eastern School of Manuscript Painting' which flourished during the 9th to 16th centuries. (Plate No. 1 & 2) The origin of 'Rajasthani School of Miniature Painting' is the natural outcome of long sequence of art tradition. The miniatures that comprises the Rajasthani School, found in such profusion in several art galleries of India and the world, had not strangely enough originated as miniatures. (Plate No. 3) There is abundance of several large size drawings and illustrations which show that this was primarily a 'Mural Art'. In the palaces of Jaipur and Udaipur, there are wall paintings which show how wonderfully the painter of this school produced large murals. The prevalence of this style is also evident in scores of small palaces, havelis and historical monuments in and around these two well known centres of mural art. The rasalila and the love of Radha and Krishna form one of the favourite themes.¹ The other themes loved by the patrons of this art were royal processions, war scenes, court scenes, hunting scenes, portraits and bewitching landscapes complete with flora and fauna peculiar to this area. Infact, these paintings projected the mirror of life of the people of Rajasthan who were a proud marshal race. With the advent of Mughal and Persian miniatures, the style of Rajasthani paintings started imbibing the genre of miniature painting. (Plate No. 4) These paintings are superbly painted with a keen sense of detail, a lyrical aura and symbolism. Today these paintings have carved a niche in the classical world of Indian painting alongwith their compatriot styles like Mughal and Persian. Rajasthan being the land of Maharajas who floundered in wealth, luxury and splendour had developed a taste to promote fine arts and musical traditions which were instrumental in full-fledged patronage for the art of miniature painting. These paintings present a royal and glorious grandeur of the palaces and the royalties. The wonderfully talented painters of this school had an opportunity to travel to the darbars (courts) situated in Punjab hills such as Kangra, Guler, Basohli, Chamba and were at home mentally and spiritually as they tasted a new found creative freedom and patronship from the rulers.² These rulers were eventually brought under the reign of 'Lion of Punjab'- Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the boundaries of whose empire stretched from Afghanistan border on the one side to the Chinese border on the other side. (Plate No. 5) The Khalsa Empire he established, professed secularism as it had adopted the high annals of Sikhism based on the teachings of Guru Nanak and other Sikh Gurus i.e. peace, brotherhood and welfare of the whole mankind and these painters were very comfortable in pursuing their creative talents under his benign gaze and encouragement.³ Slowly yet steadily the thematic content of these wonderful painters changed to Sikh and Khalsa Raj themes (Plate No. 6), narration of Janam Sakhis events (Plate No. 7), palace scenes, war scenes (Plate No. 8), hunting scenes and portraits of royalties, noble men and women. (Plate No. 9) This emerged as the

‘Sikh School of Miniature Painting’ which had adopted new themes based on ethos of Sikhism, leaves from the glorious Sikh history, significant episodes relating to the lives of Ten Sikh Gurus (preachers) and portraits of valiant Sikh warriors, saints, bhagats and Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s family, courtiers and generals.⁴ (Plate No. 10)

At this point one would question the very definition of Sikh art. While defining the term Sikh art the basic ingredients and elements, which have contributed towards its emergence, may primarily be the works of art specifically done by Sikh artists, on Sikh themes patronised by Sikhs or produced within the territory governed or otherwise dominated by Sikhs.⁵ The credit for valuable artistic contribution towards its blossoming also goes to those prominent painters who were not essentially Sikh by religion but were equally efficient and appreciative of the basic spirit of Sikhism. The pinnacle of Sikh art was achieved during the Sikh rule under Maharaja Ranjit Singh whose powerful persistent patronage and support encouraged many admirers and connoisseurs of Sikh art, who were at the helm of affairs in the Lahore court further facilitating development of Sikh art to attain its new glorious heights and expanded boundaries. The literal definition of Sikh art thus remains Art by, for and or about Sikhs.⁶

The painters from Rajasthan who migrated to the Sikh empire for new opportunities and greener pastures enriched the ‘Sikh Miniature Art’ with their excellent technique, colour sense, poetic flavour and remarkable sense of detail and expression as they were open enough to imbibe the manifestations of humanism and essence of its content which is the bedrock of the lofty ideals of Sikh history, culture and traditions which proliferate a long saga of valour and sacrifices. These themes were fascinating yet similar to the themes they have been pursuing in Rajasthan from one generation to another. They found a new scope in expressing their creative energies through their works on the hallmark content of Sikhism which disseminates spirituality, service to mankind and upholding of high moral and ethical personal piousness in day-to-day living, as preached and practiced by the Great Ten Sikh Gurus. The art which has taken upon itself to carry forward the flame of spirit of Khalsa has set a special sacred task for its promoters, propagators, artists and collectors. Thus the all encompassing spirit of Sikhism was primarily featured in the Janam Sakhis⁷ (traditional narratives of the life of Guru Nanak). (Plate No. 11) As the lofty aromas of Sikh faith spread far and wide, more and more artists and creative persons contributed in the development of visual presentation of themes related to Sikhism in varied styles and conceptual adaptations. This saw the rapid development of illustrated pothis⁸ (manuscripts) which covered the plethora of essence of Sikhism. (Plate No. 12)

Sikh art was born in the Janam Sakhis and apart from an isolated series of portraits, it was evidently confined to this context for well over a century. Janam Sakhis are hagiographic accounts of the life of Guru Nanak-the founder of Sikhism, popular narratives that have enjoyed a considerable popularity throughout the history of the Sikh panth.⁹ (Plate

No. 13) The splendour of Sikh miniature art initially came alive in the illustrative narration of Janam Sakhis executed in the style of Rajasthani miniature art. Janam Sakhis, meaning a life as witnessed, ordinarily the fictions depicting legends of Baba Nanak's life cropped up during the early centuries of his birth, represent the faithful vision of the Divine.¹⁰ Miniature Painting with its elaborate styling and aesthetic richness was capable of capturing and depicting in true sense the innermost and deep-rooted meaning or essence of vision born of an emotionally attached mind and sometimes the knowing intuitive eye that transports a vision from beyond to within, from material to spiritual. Janam Sakhi manuscripts are considered as popular and sacred in the Sikh tradition as are Puranas¹¹ in Brahmanical and Jatakas¹² in Buddhist traditions.¹³ The preparation, documentation, propagation and stylization endeavours related to this tradition presumably are attributed to the Udasi, Ramraiya and Sodhi Deras¹⁴ (monasteries)- all offshoots of the mainstream of Sikhism. Of these, the Deras of the Udasis, the self-appointed preachers of Sikhism, were perhaps the most active, being the best-fitted for the job by their leisure as well as interest.¹⁵ The Janam Sakhis are characterised into two basic traditions as Puratan Janam Sakhi and Bhai Bala Janam Sakhi.¹⁶ The chronology of the Janam Sakhis or the date when the first Janam Sakhi was created is not known. However, it is evidenced from one of the varan¹⁷ (ballads) written by Bhai Gurdas, a disciple of Guru Arjan and the scribe of the Adi-Granth¹⁸ (Sikh scripture) that there was a well-developed Janam Sakhi tradition in vogue during the tenure of the fifth Sikh Guru.¹⁹ Gradually, a new practice started: the practice of illustrating the Janam Sakhis. The first such attempt, as far as we have been able to ascertain, was made as early as 1658 during the pontificate of the seventh Guru Har Rai. With the passage of time, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the number of such attempts multiplied.²⁰ Works like Janam Sakhis, Puratan Janam Sakhi, Mehraban's Sachkhand Pothi, Bhai Mani Singh's Gian Ratnawali and Bhai Bala Janam Sakhi appear to attempt at recounting the life-story of Guru Nanak, though each one save an unanimity as regards the details of his birth, parentage, family and its links, travel accounts and his discourse during such travels with yogis, sadhus, faqirs etc, has its own vision of him, obviously, for the being they wrote of was different in each one's case. (Plate No. 14) The illustrations were individually improvised in representing Guru Nanak by each successive artist.²¹ The use of illustrations in the biographies of Guru Nanak was in reality intended to meet the religious- and not so much aesthetic-requirements of the readers. The aesthetic beauty, if there was any, was only incidentally present because the entire emphasis was here laid on gratifying the devotional needs of the faithful.²²

Some of the Janam Sakhis, or narratives, are quite fanciful even attributing miracles to Guru Nanak, while the others appear to unveil, from behind such fancifulness, a philosophic or religious message. There are many that incorporate in them a hymn, series of couplets or other quotations, the narrative part serving only as their scene setting.²³ (Plate No. 15) The Sikh miniature paintings have crystallized the art of illustration into a highly adorable

and revered classic expression as the elements adopted from Rajasthani, Persian and Mughal styles have added many new dimensions in these works. Floral margins (Hashias) and geometrical patterns have enhanced the visual appeal adorned with divine and lyrical colour palette. The linear brushwork is flawless, efficient and bewitching and the accent on paraphernalia of a particular picture presents minute details of costumes, textiles, weapons, ornaments, plants, rocks, trees, birds and animals native to Punjab. With these elements the Sikh miniatures acquired a regal and imperial persona where the art of portraiture had a new facility which triggered a keen interest in the noble and aristocratic populace of the day thus establishing a coveted place in Sikh art genre. This genre also propelled the emergence of thematic extension, imaginative expansion, fictional dimension, spiritual concern, devotional aura and artistic manifestation. It also presented a new realm of creative satisfaction and a stretch of artistic evolvement. It being the true Indian style was far ahead in the later western style of painting introduced by the Europeans to the Sikh empire. The style of oil painting on canvas or other surfaces though realistic in its approach was not competent enough to touch the soul of Sikh philosophy and ideology which was best expressed through the genre of Sikh miniature painting. The European paintings introduced to Sikh art lacked the deep sensibilities of Indian environment, perspectives, perceptions and conceptions. The Pan-India aesthetic vocabulary of the thought processes of Indian religious sects was precisely depicted through the Sikh miniatures which are like the gems of high spiritual and divine visualizations where mind is at the nucleus of creation and expression. Thus the Sikh miniature art scores a high point over the photographic stylization of western art which had many initial admirers.

The first iconic images of Guru Nanak establishing him as an apostle and saint par excellence were visualized evocatively through these lyrical drawings and miniature paintings concentrating on the elements such as Guru Nanak's dynamism, multi-profiles of face, regalia including nimbus and attendants with fly-whisks, saintliness, facial sublimity, his costumes, rosary, tilaka, shash, padukas (wooden clogs), bairagan (yogis crutch), lota (utensil) and locations of his seat befitting his Prophet's form, have been aptly rendered in these illustrations. Taking a cue from the Rajasthani miniatures, the Sikh miniature paintings too concentrated on creating harmonious landscopic settings and environment where Nanak was usually depicted seated under a tree, near a river or against a terrain, but when in a dwelling on a carpet or a sheet of cloth laid on a bedecked floor he is presented wearing a saili, topi, rosary, long jama or kurta, a shash, a tilaka, a nimbus, a simarini (rosary), a benign smile, the face turned slightly to write or to left are the usual features that artists engaged in illustrating Janam Sakhis preferred to render. From his topi seems to radiate a circle of light, something like a divine aura symbolizing an enlightened state. In Janam Sakhi illustrations cap is an essentiality, though painted variedly as conical, close fitting and sometimes his best known Qalandari. A shawl or chaddar on his shoulder painted to enhance dignity of his

bearing is sometimes replaced by gudari symbolical of Kabir's all assimilating bearing, humility, all embracing, all pervading expanses of his life and mission.²⁴

Sikh miniature painting enshrined in Janam Sakhi manuscripts is a store-house of expressive and evocative style wherein the teachings of Guru Nanak have been lucidly propagated and expressed in enthralling visuals and have laid stress on symbolic depiction of the manifestations of his ideas and teachings stressing upon all the mankind to shun evil and mindless rituals, embracing of pious and truthful living, dignity of labour, peace, love and universal brotherhood, destruction of evil thoughts and practices and above all no discrimination on the basis of caste, colour, creed and religion. Caring and sharing and service of mankind are the other true divine ethics preached by Guru Nanak and these ideals have been faithfully translated into delightful visuals by the artists in these magnificent miniature art paintings. Guru Nanak- the Great Guru believed that violence and hatred are the results of ignorance prevailing in the minds of ill-informed tyrant and haughty souls. One should spread the light of enlightenment to dispel the darkness of ignorance so that one can visualize the eternal beauty of this universe created by the almighty. Suitable narratives in gurmukhi and local dialects and Persian have been used in these miniatures to describe a particular event or an episode from the life of Guru Nanak. This provides consolidation of the numerous historical and chronological events and happenings called kautaks (miracles). (Plate No. 16) The main idea behind the depiction of miracles in these miniatures was to enlighten the viewer through magical symbolism which effectively touches the innermost chords of the beholder and thereby implanting a divine idea into his soul and spirit.

Another aspect which highlights in Sikh miniature paintings based on Guru Nanak's four Udasis means 'Missionary Travels'. During these travels he had an opportunity to meet saints, pandits, yogis, warriors, mullahs and even demons and ferociously inhuman and tyrant rulers in distant lands. These encounters have been creatively and aesthetically illustrated in Janam Sakhis and offer an enlightening account of his yatras from Punjab to Iraq, from Punjab to Sri Lanka and beyond and even upto Tibet and China. (Plate No. 17) These accounts truly establish him as a true apostle and messenger of God as he emerged as a one-man army fighting against the widely spread oppression and ignorance on peace-loving weak and oppressed populace. The artists of these Sikh miniature paintings have done true justice to spread the mission of Guru Nanak and these illustrated Janam Sakhis are a remarkable source to understand this gigantic soul-searching endeavour and a reservoir of divine and spiritual knowledge.

There are some old illustrated Janam Sakhis of Guru Nanak which contain a large number of paintings. Some of these valuable manuscript pothis (manuscripts) are available with widely scattered individual families which for centuries have preserved them with great reverence and care and even now are unwilling to part with them. A few of them are available in some libraries and archives as well, situated both in India and abroad. Some of

the notable Janam Sakhis are: Janam Sakhi with Pyare Lal (1715 B. /1658 A.D.)- the oldest dated Janam Sakhi in the possession of Shri Pyare Lal Kapur (resident of Hauz Qazi, Delhi) for several generations, brought by the family from western Punjab while migrating to Delhi in 1947. The Janam Sakhi, transcribed by one Gorakh Das from an earlier version of Bhai Bala's Janam Sakhi, has 267 folios and contains 28 paintings; Janam Sakhi at the Bagharian Fort (1781 B. /1724 A.D.)- this is in the custody of Bhai Ariduman Singh of the Bagharian Fort, District Patiala. This manuscript is a prized possession with Bagharian family for several generations. It appears similar to the Pyare Lal Janam Sakhi and is a transcription of some older version. The name of the transcriber is not given anywhere. It has 212 folios and 42 paintings; Janam Sakhi at the Punjab Language Department, Patiala (1790 B. /1733 A.D.)- this manuscript is a Photostat copy of a certain Janam Sakhi preserved in the Old India Office Library, England and has been in the custody of the Punjab Language Department, Patiala for several decades. A microfilm copy of the same Janam Sakhi is available at the Punjab State Archives, Patiala. It is akin to the Puratan or Walayat Wali Janam Sakhi and presumably is a close version of the same. The paintings contained in this manuscript are done by Alam Chand Raj and Bhai Sanghera deserves praise for accomplishing the task of production of this rare manuscript; Janam Sakhi with the Maharaja of Patiala, No-1 (1804 B. /1747 A.D.)- the pothi is in the personal library of Maharaja Yadavindra Singh of Patiala and its version is close to the 'Gyan Ratnawali' of Bhai Mani Singh. It was written by a writer named Charpat. It has 572 folios and 152 paintings; Janam Sakhi with Harbhajan Singh Chawla (1817 B. /1760 A.D.)- it is a transcript of certain earlier version of the Bala Janam Sakhi. It has 256 folios and 80 paintings. There are suitably labeled by the writer himself. This manuscript is in the possession of Harbhajan Singh Chawla, an antique dealer of Amritsar; Janam Sakhi at Patna (1825 B. /1768 A. D.)- this manuscript is also a transcript of earlier version of Bala Janam Sakhi and is in the possession of an Udasi Mahant of Patna city, Shri Ram Krishan. According to the Mahant, the Janam Sakhi has come down to him as part of the valuable property of the Udasi Ashram of which he is the present head. This manuscript is written by Smat Ram and illustrated by artist Sadhu Ram; Janam Sakhi with the Maharaja of Patiala No.2 (circa 1770 A.D.)- this manuscript also a transcript of certain version of the Bala Janam Sakhi preserved in the personal library of Maharaja Yadavindra Singh of Patiala. There are 137 folios and 82 paintings in it; Janam Sakhi at Una (circa 1800 A.D.)- this Janam Sakhi is believed to have been got prepared by Baba Sahib Singh Bedi (1756-1834 A.D.) of Una under his personal supervision. Supposed to be written during the beginning of the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Presently it is housed in National Museum, New Delhi; Janam Sakhi at the Punjab State Archives, Patiala (circa 1800 .D.)- it was purchased by the Punjab State Archives, Patiala from one Hakim Sita Ram of Amritsar. It has 38 paintings of Guru Nanak, all of them depicting him as a child; Janam Sakhi at the Central State Museum,

Amritsar (circa 1857 B. /1800 A.D.)- this manuscript is also a transcript of some old version of Bala Janam Sakhi. It has 410 folios and 16 paintings in all; Janam Sakhi at the National Museum, New Delhi (circa 1800 A.D.)- this pothi (manuscript) is a copy of the Janam Sakhi prepared by Bhai Sant Das Chhibbar in 1834 B. /1777A.D. It has 525 folios in all, out of which 482 are concerned with the life of Guru Nanak and the remaining 43 are in praise of the Goddess. There are 74 paintings in it; Janam Sakhi at the Panjab University, Chandigarh Library (1902 B. /1845 A.D.)- it was originally prepared by Bawa Ishar Singh Bedi of Phagwara. The pothi (manuscript) of the Panjab University, Chandigarh is a copy of the Bawa's pothi having 382 folios and 66 paintings; Janam Sakhi with Principal Pritam Singh (1926 B. /1869 A.D.)- also a transcript of some old version of the Bala Janam Sakhi, it was prepared by one Charan Dass at instance of one Bawa Sukhdev. The pothi has 346 folios and 101 paintings. The owner of the pothi is Sardar Pritam Singh, former Principal, Government College, Ludhiana and Lithographic Janam Sakhi (1940 B. /1883 A.D.)- it is also version of Bala Janam Sakhi printed in 1883 A.D. by Chirag Din Tajar of Lahore in his Litho Press. It has 96 paintings of Guru Nanak arranged Sakhiwise. A copy of this pothi is with Dr. Rattan Singh Jaggi of Punjabi University, Patiala.²⁵

The Janam Sakhi illustrations form the foundation of all religious, spiritual, historical, philosophical and devotional manifestations of Sikhism and act as a lighthouse which guides the imaginative stretch and expanse by throwing light on the entire fictional dimensions, spiritual concerns and divine messages. These gave Sikh art its style portraiture, crystallizing events, arresting movement, narration and serialization, landscape, all motifs and symbols, colours' balance, minuteness, refinement, defining borders, margins and other graphic renderings, imbuing in visual forms the invincible spirit and in personal likenesses the appropriate personality aspects and all that was required for discovering and re-discovering in a theme its inherent message and object.

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Plate- 1



Plate- 2

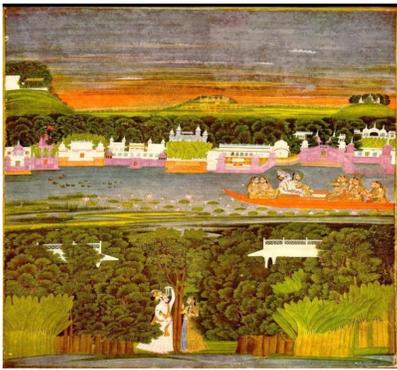


Plate- 3



Plate- 4



Plate- 5

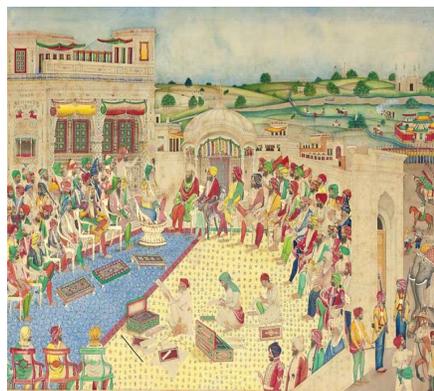


Plate- 6

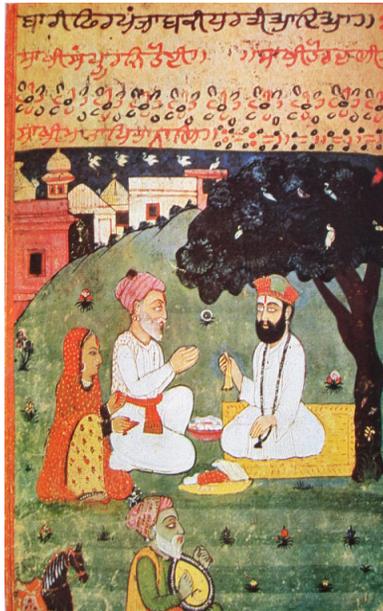


Plate- 11



Plate- 12

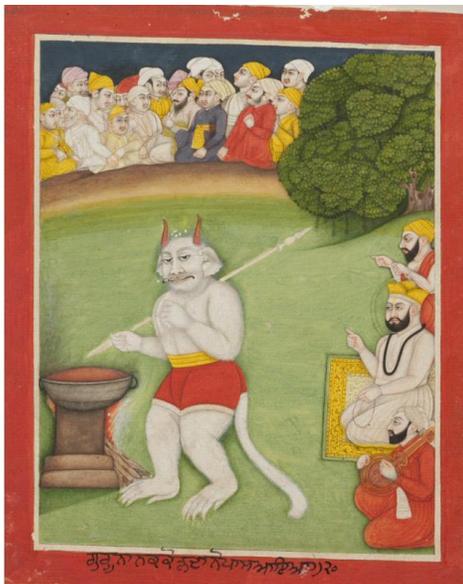


Plate- 13



Plate- 14

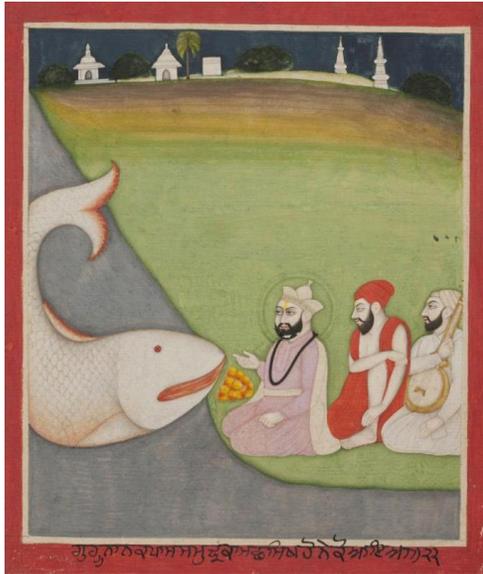


Plate- 15

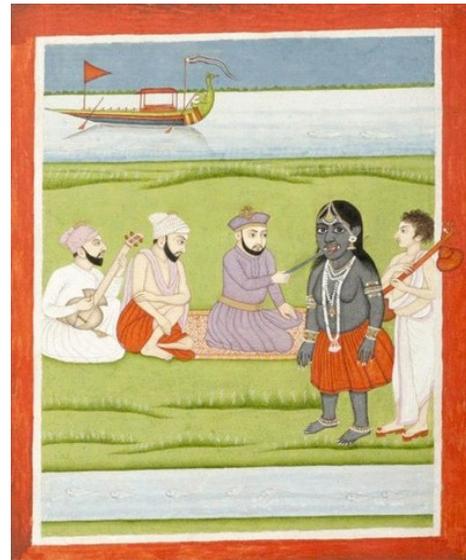


Plate- 16



Plate- 17