

# Guru Gobind Singh in Portraiture: Alterations and Adaptations in Originality

Gurdeep Kour, Rohita Sharma

**Abstract:** Although the portraits of Mughal Emperors and Rajput rulers are acknowledged as near original and contemporary by scholars, while existence of various versions of portraits of Guru Gobind Singh in miniature forms through the hands of Mughal, Punjabi and Pahari painters create qualms on the real likeness due to changing patronage and stylistic variations developed in Punjab. The study discusses the prevailing suspicions of likeness as well as alterations and adaptations in various versions of portraits of Guru Gobind Singh from seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. The study is based on data analysis and review of literature. Analytical method is applied to write the paper.

**Index Terms:** Alteration, Imaginary, Likenesses, Mughal, Originality, Pahari

## I. INTRODUCTION

Guru Gobind Singh inheriting a literary and poetic darbar from his father succeeding in 1675 at the age of nine, was an expertise of pen and sword. Guru Gobind Singh's court was a major attraction for musicians, scribes and poets observing for new clientele after the changes in cultural strategy invested by the Emperor Aurangzeb had meant a decrease in chances for employ at the Mughal court. Although, various likenesses of Guru Gobind Singh exist from his childhood to young age, but often these are assumed as imaginary work of eighteenth- nineteenth centuries. The study discusses the negligent of real likeness of tenth Guru emerged among stylistic variations of Punjab.

## II. PORTRAYALS OF GURU GOBIND SINGH

In the last quarter of seventeenth century, when Pahari style was developing on the various local centres of northern India under Rajput aristocracy, there comes a childhood portrait of Guru Gobind Rai at the age of ten (fig. 1), now in the collection of Anurag Singh (Singh, On the bases of resemblances of facial features with father Guru Tegh Bahadur, see frontispiece for the real portrait of Guru Tegh Bahadur commissioned in Dhaka), it is clear that the portrait is of Gobind Rai. Identifiable and distinct face indicates the originality of the portrait. Like his father, he also wore red turban with golden broad- band, red coloured short *patka*, and black coloured woollen rosary worn by the *faqirs*, which indicates that the portrait is commissioned after his

succession at the age of nine after his father's martyr. Black rosary round the neck is the characteristic of the portraits of Sikh Gurus of last decade of seventeenth and early eighteenth century, but in the genuine portraits of Guru Hargobind black rosary is absent. In some later Mandi portraits, black rosary appears in imaginary portraits of Gurus. The fashion came from Muslim- Sufi tradition, but also rare in hill paintings. In the childhood likeness, facial features resemble Basohli style eye, without earrings, fine lines and clarity of work, which designates the commission of fine artist from hill area. Golden coloured basin and flower pot near the child also proves the relevancy of style with early Pahari phase. The style of wooden balustrade also favours the development of art at Anandpur by hill or Jaipur painters at the darbar of tenth Guru, because wooden balustrade is popularly used in Rajasthani paintings, but rare in Pahari paintings. The relation of Kachwaha rulers with Sikh Gurus also established during Guru Hargobind, which were continued till tenth Guru, and supports the possibility of migration of Rajasthani painters at Anandpur, while plan red *hashiya* and black rule within red border is a common feature of Indian painting. The practice of toying with a flower goes back to seventeenth century. Although, Guru Tegh Bahadur wore long length and plated robes of Shah Jahan, frontispiece), but in childhood portrait, Guru Gobind Rai appears in a robe tied at the centre, distinct from Mughal robes tying in right or left, was discarded by tenth Guru in later years. The fashion of tying a robe in the centre was rare in Punjab hills.

There are accounts available of the *dastar* ceremony (turban) and Guruship ceremony of the child Gobind Rai, in which he wore *zamurdi* (green) coloured turban and ceremonial dress for the special occasion of *dastar* ceremony and was also putting on some arms. A Tikka mark of sandal wood was fixed on his forehead. During the Guruship ceremony, wearing a chaplet of pearls round his neck and a gorgeous turban on his head, a sword slung round the waist, he sat on the Guru-seat, a seat, with bolsters on which Guru Tegh Bahadur used to sit, was positioned on a wooden platform. Both accounts do not support the commissioning of portrait on two auspicious occasions. Simplicity and isolation indicates its non- ceremonial occasion or possibility of commissioning the portrait under the patronage of any Sikh devotee during 1675 or copy of the original, as he always wore a *kalghi* in his turban from his childhood, popular as *kalghian wala* in Sikh traditional accounts.

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In the early hill paintings during last decades of seventeenth century, a lock of hair is commonly seen. Design of carpet, sky strip and flower pot in the likeness of Guru Gobind Rai also have resemblance with the convention of early hill paintings. Another childhood portrait at Gurudwara of Ahiya Ganz in Lucknow, was noticed by Piara Singh Padam Aryan also mentioned a portrait in Patna, which is correspondingly assumed to have been ready during the Guru's lifetime (*hayati*). Kishan Singh's note as presented by the author: *Sri Kalagidhar Sahib Guru Gobind Singh Ji dasvin patishahi chhavi jo vacate hayat vich tayar hoi hai mutabak patna sahib vali banai*).



Figure 1. Childhood portrait of Guru Gobind Rai, (Source: private collection)

A new discovery is the portrait of tenth Guru from the first original manuscript of Sri Dasam Granth Sahib titled the 'Anandpuri Sarup' as that was the location where it was compiled in 1696 A.D. Piara Singh Padam was the first researcher to publish the picture,. The tenth Guru on a horseback is hunting a tiger (fig. 2). The incident was happened at Paonta, when a man- eater tiger of white colour was troubling people. There is an interesting account available of the hunting incident at a distance 8- 10 km. far from Paonta. The hunt of a white lion with a sword and a shield was done in the presence of Raja Medini Prakash and Fateh Shah and their companions (Singh, 2010, 157- 158. Also see, Gandhi, 2004, see footnote on 150). But the account does not match the portrait, as it appears an ideal hunting scene of Guru. Guru also mentioned in his autobiography about the hunting games and training of martial art and mock fighting to trained the Sikhs Mounted on a horse and releasing an arrow from a bow is an effort to capture a momentous scene. Detailing and clarity of facial features with curly beard of black colour appear authentic and contemporary as dated 1696, aged of about thirty. The fashion of green coloured robes during hunts was promoted by Mughals as well as green halo was also popular element of Shah Jahan period Without any royal prop of hunting as popular among Mughals, only Guru is highlighted by the painter. Portrait also has stylistic resemblance with Emperor Aurangzeb period hunting scenes in which green colour is dominantly used (Royal Ontario Museum, museum no. Pattern of the fabric also has resemblance with Bilaspur style (see Victoria and Albert Museum, museum no. Possibility of

portraying the scene on verbal account can be assumed by Bilaspur artist, as Guru also visited Bilaspur many times or settlement of painters from Bilaspur state to Anandpur is also possible. In 1701, after the battle of Bhangani, the relations of Guru Gobind Singh with Raja Bhim Chand of Kahlur became peaceful and friendly and he visited Anandpur for forgiveness from Guru and he received a robe of honour from Guru and many people also migrated from Bilaspur to Anandpur for peaceful establishments, after the battle of Bhangani, in the *Apani Katha* the return to Anandpur is also described by the Guru. Leaving the villages of Kahlur, they went and settled somewhere else). The possibility of migration of painters from Bilaspur can be assumed.

There is also a dagger of Guru Gobind Singh, embellished with hunting scene, Guru is portrayed hunting the tiger with his sword, and two elephants are facing each other, surrounded by a mounted person and some attendants, which really match the incident, happened at Paonta. Mann marks that these portraits leave slight ambiguity that some of the accomplished artists of the time had relocated to Anandpur and were employed under Sikh patronage .Mann further explains the portraits from Anandpur that these paintings have interesting correspondence with the verbal portraits drawn by the poets singing at his (Guru) court at Anandpur .The line and colours of these portraits are from Pahari style. Migrating Sikh devotees as well as painters working at Anandpur circulated this type of stylized portraits of tenth Guru in other hill areas after disassemble of Anandpur darbar.

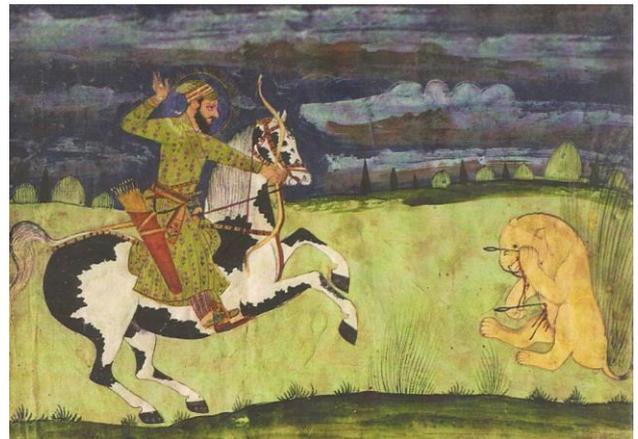


Figure 2. Guru Gobind Singh on horseback, (Sources: Padam, 2008, 15- 16. For coloured portrait, also see Mann, 2008, 244)

Goswamy and Smith also mention the possibility of a likeness of Guru, that one comes upon a reference to a portrait of Guru Gobind Singh, having possibly been made by a Pahari painter, for it is said that the ruler of the hill state of Bilaspur, with whom the Guru had to deal on many occasions in the course of his tumultuous career, once dispatched a painter from his court to bring back a likeness of the Guru. Whether the painter did indeed make such a portrait is not recorded. All that one knows is that no such portrait has survived .

### III. MANDI PORTRAITS

Guru Gobind Singh also visited other hill states of Punjab. In the Mandi district of the present Indian Punjab, there is a town called Ravalsar. At a distance of ten miles west of Ravalsar, there is a pond of water, which is considered sacred by the Hindus. An annual fair is held at this place on the occasion of Baisakhi. Guru Gobind Rai visited Mandi to give the message of peace to the hill Rajas, who had assembled there on the occasion of Baisakhi fair, and secondly, Guru along with his family visited at Ravalsar in Mandi at the invitation of Raja Sidh Sen in 1701 and met here with other hill Rajas to discuss the political- religious policy of Emperor Aurangzeb. Generously entertained by Mandi ruler, Guru stayed here for one month and blessed the city.

There is a portrait of Guru Gobind Singh in Mandi style at National Museum (fig. 3), in which his appearance is fully distinct from earlier portraits. Goswamy and Smith write, a somewhat coarsely made portrait, in the style that obtained near the end of the seventeenth century at the hill court of Mandi- a town that Guru Gobind Singh did certainly visit-sometimes said to be that of the great Guru (Goswamy and Smith, .But Dr. Daljeet remarks, this portrait seems to have been rendered in 1690s when Guru Gobind Singh visited Mandi and was in all probabilities a personal guest of Raja Sidhasen. As such it amounts to its rare historicity. Its Takri inscription- Guru Gobind Singh, is too a special feature .Green background with band of white and blue at the top is the characteristic of early Mandi style. Profile face is without any emblem of divinity and Guru's name is also inscribed on the portrait in Gurmukhi as well as in Takri. The portrait has distinct identity from earlier Mughalized features of dresses and artistic elements, which can be of his second visit in 1701, in which his style of turban and robe had been changed and appeared of later years of Guru and the title of 'Singh' was also after baptismal ceremony of Khalsa, while according to Mann, Guru assumed the title 'Singh' in .



**Figure 3. Portrait of Guru Gobind Singh commissioned by the Raja of Mandi, end of 17<sup>th</sup> century, (Source: National Museum, New Delhi, acc. no. 71.93)**

There is a scene in which Maharaja Sidh Sen is receiving an embassy (fig. 4) by a master painter of the Mandi atelier, in which aged Sidh Sen is receiving two persons, seated in front of him. The young man's facial features has much resemblance with Guru Gobind Singh's portrait of National Museum and the other old age person seated with Guru is

Gopal Chand of Guler (See portrait of Mian Gopal Chand of Guler, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, acc. no. 17.2722), who also made his obeisance and large offerings to the Guru at Anandpur after aided by the Guru and his commanders in the battle of 1694-95 A.D. (Singh, 1998, 81). Possibly, this is a record of a meeting in Mandi by the royal painter. According to Goswamy, a painter travelled with the ruler (Sidh Sen), to recording on occasion specific moments or events, such as the stage in a military campaign in which Raja Sidh Sen appears together with his commanders. A blue coloured stallion with other stallions along with some attendants appear in the foreground. An attendant in unshaven beard depicts unavoidable Sikh identity, among trimmed and clean shaved attendants of the two Rajput rulers. Blue coloured popular horse of Guru Gobind Singh is also appeared in the foreground. The robe and broad-waist band of Guru Gobind Singh in both portraits (figs. 3, 4) also depict fashion popular in Mandi. In the scene of assembly, Guru appears younger and his style of turban is distinct (fig. 4) from the inscribed likeness, in which he appears aged person of about thirty- five years old (fig. 3). Both portraits can be assumed by the royal painter of Mandi court.



**Figure 4. Maharaja Sidh Sen Receiving an Embassy, A Master of the Mandi atelier, (Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. no. 1995.39)**



Details of faces (figs. 3 & 4)

#### IV. MISPERCEPTION OF MANDI- BILASPUR PORTRAITS

Although, the portraits of Mandi rulers are based on originality, while Guru Gobind Singh's later portraits appear imaginary accompanied by first Guru except the availability of real portrait of tenth Guru in the last decade of seventeenth or first decade of eighteenth century. There are some imaginary portraits, which are mistakenly titled as '*Guru Gobind Singh (or a princely figure) encounters with a saintly figure*', possibly Guru Nanak. Dr. Daljeet ascribed the painting to Mandi style now in National Museum, and another similar painting at Victoria and Albert Museum (fig. 5) is also ascribed to Mandi style in the museum records. But in actual, both portraits are based on mid- seventeenth century delicate but imaginary portrait (fig. 6) painted in Bilaspur state by Mughal painter which is also inscribed above the head of figure in Persian '*shri guru awwal nanak ji*' and on the red border at the bottom in Takri '*guru nanak, guru arjan, guru har rai*' (Goswamy, 2000, 30- 31) and later copied by Mandi painters roughly. Princely figure (fig. 6) in the portrait has facial resemblance with Raja Dip Chand of Bilaspur (see Victoria and Albert Museum, museum no. IS.120-1954), far from the likenesses of Guru Har Rai and Guru Gobind Singh. Its green background memorizes the background of original portrait of Guru Hargobind (Singh and Singh, 2012, 115), and creates a bridge between Mughal, Mandi and Kiratpur- Bilaspur styles. Later portraits of Mandi- Bilaspur styles (figs. 5, 6) may be during the invasions of Banda Singh Bahadur on Mandi and Bilspur states to prove Sikh supremacy on the rulers of both states, after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. The imaginary portraits of Guru Nanak in white plated garb dotted with black, holding a *morchala* (peacock feather) in left hand accompanied by Guru Gobind, appear first imaginary portraits by hill painters in hilly areas associated with Sikh Gurus.

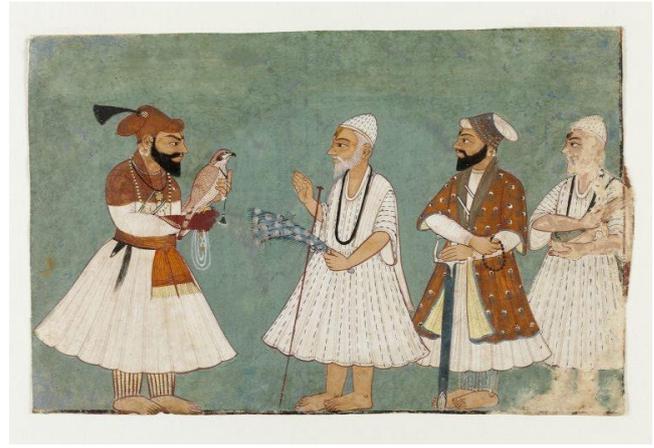


Figure 5. Guru Gobind Singh and Guru Nanak, Mandi, 1700 - ca. 1720, (Source: Victoria and Albert Museum, Museum no. IS.40-1954)

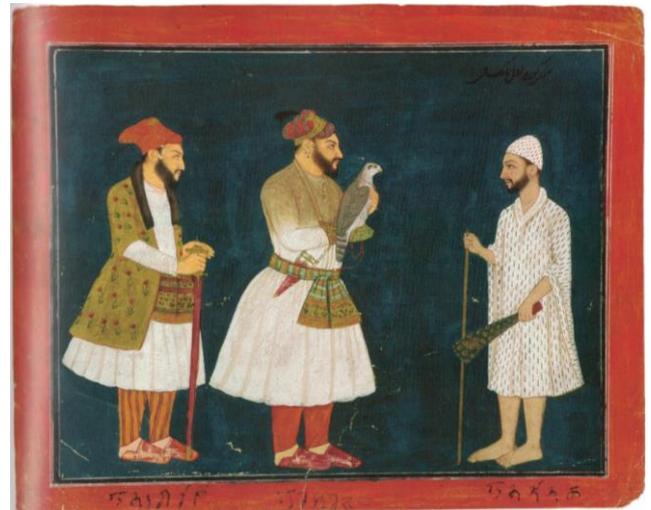


Figure 6. Guru Nanak approached by a princely figure, Bilaspur, (Source: Chandigarh Museum, acc. no. 1843)

#### V. PORTRAITS OF ANANDPUR ATELIER

Guru Gobind Singh created a race, which was not only martial, but also cultured and literary, and was not less in any way from its contemporary cultured Mughal- Rajput races. During Guru Gobind Singh's stay at Paonta, Dehradun and Garhwal were centres of art activities, while at Nahan, painting started a little later and earlier portraits of Nahan rulers came in Bilaspur style. After the triumph of the Guru in encounters against the Rajput hill chiefs, his height and authority in the constituency matured and various forts were commenced. About Guru Gobind Singh's court, Mann writes, the scripts offer metaphors of how he (Guru Gobind Singh) used to sit on the throne (*takhat*), escorted by his peculiar assistant (*hazuri tahilia*) gesturing the royal flywhisk (*chaur*), and by the chamberlains (*ardasia*) who proclaimed the invitees, as well as by intellectuals (*muktas*), bards (*kavi*), copyists (*likharis*), musicians (*dhadhis/rababis*), drum players (*nagarchis*) and flag-bearers (*jhanda bardar*). All these were estimated to be in presence (*hazir*).

Except the existence of original Mandi portrait of tenth Guru and Mandi- Bilaspur imaginary portraits, there was another style of likeness of tenth Guru with small, soft featured face with small beard appeared in the first decade of eighteenth century pasted in Anandpuri scriptures. A portrait of Guru, commissioned by Mata Sundri ji (Padam, 2000, see frontispiece. Also see, Mann, is also exist, which indicates the patronization of painter under the wife of Guru after his death and also proves the authenticity of likeness of Guru and his attendant, fully distinct from popular Mughal style. The name of scribes are mentioned but the name of painter is absent. The standard of style is also better than contemporary style prevalent in hill areas. This style indicates the existence of a different school in hills emerged at Anandpur different from Mandi and Bilaspur styles.

The Mandi portrait of tenth Guru is also important because it grants a distinct identity to the Sikhs, and separates as well as liberal them from Mughal- Rajput identity of Mughal influences, but portraits from Anandpuri scriptures prove the existence of a distinct school under Sikh patrons, which grew and extend with the time. Mandi portrait (fig. 3) has some facial resemblance with Anandpur likeness (fig. 7) of Guru. The copying and circulation of this stylized portrait of Guru can be seen in Sikh scriptures, while original portrait of Guru commissioned in Mandi state did not circulate in eighteenth century. Another reason of copying and attaching the portraits of tenth Guru with *Dasam Granth* may be to grant a distinct identity of Guru's own scripture from Sikh scripture 'Guru Granth Sahib.

The style of tenth Guru in small conical turban with *kalghi* and *farra* (flag), wearing heavy blue- red robes, heavy *patka*, holding an arrow in left hand, seated in kneeling posture and a bow placed near him copied many times. The style is also distinct from Guler style seated and equestrian portraits of tenth Guru popular during late eighteenth- nineteenth centuries,.



Figure 7. Guru Gobind Singh, (Source: Mann, 2008, 243, from Anandpuri *Birh*)

Although, Goswamy and Smith mention, it is possible that a feeling that having such portraits made would amount to "idolatry" of the kind that Sikhism disapproved of prevailed among the followers. It is equally likely that the Sikh community, considerably grown as it was, still did not, except under Guru Gobind Singh, possess the air of a court to which artists naturally attach themselves. But nothing can be said with certainty. On the question of whether people at other courts where painters were active, or devotees who came to pay respectful visits to the Gurus might have had any likenesses of the Gurus made, there are indeed some scattered references to such portraits (Goswamy and Smith, 2006, 30). It is known to all that after Aurangzeb's orthodox policies, painters migrated from Mughal court to Punjab hills and Rajasthan, which is also supported by traditional Sikh accounts that the tenth Guru created the circumstances for bards, scribes, artificers and musicians to congregate to these darbars. With the imminent transformations to Islam by Emperor Aurangzeb, they fled to the openhearted darbar of the Guru, where they were handsomely paid. According to the author of *Bansavali Nama*, the Guru issued *Hukamnama* to the Sikhs in 1677 that poets, writers, painters and scholars are invited to attend his court. Hindu Rajput rulers of northern hill states inspired the painters to paint Hindu Vedic literature during seventeenth- eighteenth centuries, but Guru Gobind Singh himself inspired his followers towards the formless God. Being a poet; Guru, himself along with his court poets, were also constructing their own original literature and reconstructing Vedic literature. Louis writes, the literary accomplishments at his court echoed those chronicled for other rulers of the era, together with the Pahari Rajas who were his instant political rivals.

Like his father, tenth Guru also had knowledge of painting. There is a story of a Jain painter at Guru's court, Hansa, a spiritual teacher of the Jains, moved toward the Guru possibly to see the transcendent capability of the Guru. He was a pundit, a great painter and a chief monk. He conveyed an offering of image of the sunrise for Guru Gobind Singh. The Guru saw it and said, "Technically the painting is a fine piece of work. It seems painter's heart was dark and cruel . The story shows Guru's insight for painting.

Another portrait from Anandpuri *birh* is in private collection (fig. 7). Mann writes about the Anandpuri portraits, these portraits leave slight uncertainty that some of the proficient artists of the time had moved to Anandpur and were employed under Sikh patronage. These paintings have fascinating correspondence with the uttered portraits rendered by the poets singing at his (Guru) court at Anandpur .The line and colours of these portraits are from Pahari style. Sikh devotees as well as Pahari painters working at Anandpur circulated this type of stylized portrait of tenth Guru in other hill areas during their migration after disassemble of Anandpur darbar, because other portraits of Guru based on Anandpur likeness are also available by the hands of Pahari painters, which evidenced the existence and circulation of Anandpur portraits till the end of nineteenth century.

Two portraits of Guru at Chandigarh Museum (Acc. nos. F-49 and 2457) are of later period and from other Pahari centres (figs. 8, 9). Although, harsh facial features and more naturalistic treatment, decoration and symbols depict Pahari painters' experimentation and further development of Sikh themes in hill areas (fig. 10), but both portraits are in Anandpur tradition, in which small conical turban distinct from Mughal- Rajput style turbans, small bearded face, posture and attire, all inherited from Anandpur atelier.



Figure 8. Guru Gobind Singh “Inscribed in Punjabi Guru Gobind Singh”, (Source: Chandigarh Museum, acc.no. F-49)



Figure 9. Equestrian portrait of Guru Gobind Singh, (Source: Chandigarh Museum, acc.no. 2457)

## VI. GULER- KANGRA STYLE PORTRAITS: NEW ALTERATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

The early Sikh art was developed by Sikh devotees to secure the *darshan* of Gurus, and the examples of Sikh art in the form of portraits and Janamsakhi illustrations spread with the extent of devotees in the other areas from Sikh centers. It advanced with the empowerment of Sikh Gurus. Although, Anandpur portraits were also copied and circulated till the end of nineteenth century, while from the mid- eighteenth century, Guler and Kangra painters also started to alter the real likeness of tenth Guru. During mid- eighteenth century, with the emergence of Sikh misaldars and their political relations with northern hills, caused the migration of painters working for Sikh royal patrons. With the change in devotional patronage to royal patronage, Sikh paintings also became more royal and luxurious in appearance.

With the emergence of Sikh Maharaja, the emblem of royalty used for Sikh royals and nobles, were also started to apply for the portraits of Sikh Gurus. Tenth Guru in Mughal attires and broad- band turban; accompanied by Sikh attendants, wearing Sikh turban, dress, big black shield on back & holding a large umbrella and angels in the sky are often portrayed by Guler painters. Although, impression of Sikh luxurious life of early nineteenth century is clear, but the use of Mughal dresses and turbans for Sikh Gurus is an effort to connect them with seventeenth century Mughal impressions. The other cause of alterations and adaptations by Pahari painters of eighteenth- nineteenth centuries was the copying of seventeenth century portraits of Gurus emerged under Mughal painters.



Figure 10. Guru Gobind Singh, Guler, C. 19<sup>th</sup> century, (Source: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, acc. no. 17.2729)

## VII. CONCLUSION

Changes was continuous in the portraits of Guru Gobind Singh from seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, which were the results of interactions of various styles, innovation of different painters as well socio- political instability and diversity of Punjab plains. Likenesses of Guru by Mandi painter and Anandpur atelier appear near contemporary.

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