

*Divine Painter*

**SOBHA SINGH**

Artist who painted the divine

Dr. Kulwant Singh Khokhar

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By  
Dr. Kulwant Singh Khokhar  
12502 Nightingale Drive, Chester, Virginia, USA.

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And with S. Sobha Singh Art Gallery, Andretta, Himachal, India.

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A tribute to the one hundredth birthday anniversary celebration  
of the distinguished artist S. Sobha Singh  
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### **This Book**

is affectionately dedicated to Mrs. Gurcharan Kaur,  
and her son Mr. Hirdaypal Singh for their love,  
devotion, dedication, and selfless service to revered  
Dar ji till his ultimate union with the Lord, and even  
afterwards.

## Contents

I.	Heritage	20
II.	Struggle	29
III.	Artist In the Field	36
IV.	Ramblings	49
V.	The Artist	58
VI.	Friends	63
VII.	England	68
VIII.	Art of the Master	73
IX.	Popular Paintings	82
X.	Honors	93
XI.	After the Artist	96

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***Published by Ravi Parkashan, Hall Bazar, Amritsar -***

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## Introduction

Sobha Singh, was a Sikh painter-artist, and he achieved perfection in his avocation. His admirers and others addressed him as Dar ji – Dear Sir. He was 180 cm tall, fair colored with sharp features, slim and handsome. He had delicate build with a few faint pockmarks on his face. He wore soft and natural colored long shirt and pajama, wrapped him in a delicate woolen shawl, and carried a black portfolio in his hand. He used light, golden specs. His left leg was short and wore wooden sandals with its high left foot. He was graceful, supported flowing beard, mustaches, and kept his gray hair brushed back. He limped in his left leg and walked with long strides. He had long soft hands, which he could clap on the back of his wrist. He was soft-spoken, humble, and full of wit cum wisdom. His talks left the listeners spell bound!

He used a long stick across the painting to support his hand. He would sit at his easel for eight to twelve hours, even when in his eighties. He was an early riser, and used to read the philosophical works early in the morning. Krishnamurthi, Emerson, Thoreou and Whitman were his favorite authors. Later, he started liking Khalil Gibran (Kahlil Gibran), too.

He loved solitude, and felt in complete harmony with the nature. He was a strict vegetarian, and very selective eater. He liked light foods with a very little condiments, and was fond of sweets, fruits, and coffee.

He was born at Sri Hargobindpur in Punjab, but after moving to different places, settled down at Andretta, near Palampur in Himachal Pradesh. It was a small village and a calm, peaceful place, with snow covered Dhauladhar mountains in the background. He considered Himachal his home and his spent life here. His philosophy was simple living, high thinking and a life of virtues. He maintained, "Living on one's genius and keep growing constantly, without allowing stagnation to come one's way, was the essence of real life." He believed that an artist should be a man of a very high character. He kept making alterations in the back and front yards, and in the house itself, and rearranged things in the rooms and gallery to escape stagnation.

Everything in his room - walls of the room, upholstery, curtains, carpets, his bedding and even his clothes had subdued hues so that the paintings there were not suppressed. He was fond of light golden yellow color, loved cleanliness, and tidiness.

Semicircular verandah of his house faced the east and gave a broad view of the horizon. It had paintings hanging on its walls. There was a big cage with parakeets – mini parrots, and sparrows, making commotion especially early in the morning and at sunset. He came out in the morning, sat here and enjoyed the dawn.

His famous paintings were and are Guru Nanak (Blessing with a raised hand), Guru Gobind Singh (Last-Resort) and Guru Tegh Bahadur. His painting of Sohni-Mahiwal brought him an instant fame.

He was a member of different art academies, art societies and art associations. He was a Fellow of the Punjabi University, Patiala, and the State Artist of Punjab. He was declared Artist of the People in 1972, and was awarded Padam Shri by the Government of India in 1984. The Punjabi University conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Literature (*honoris causa*) in 1985.

He was a widely traveled person. The exhibition of his paintings had been held in many leading towns of India and in England. Apart from India, his paintings became popular in America, England, Canada, Australia and other leading countries. His paintings decorate the Parliament House, Delhi; Governor's House at Chandigarh; Punjabi University, Patiala; Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar; Municipal Hall, Amritsar; Sikh Art Museum, Amritsar; Amar Mahal Museum, Jammu; and the Fine Arts Museum, Chandigarh. His many paintings are in the possession of several individuals and institutions like Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar; Dr. Karam Singh Grewal, Amritsar etc. Maharaja Karan Singh had a special room for his paintings. His one panel was in the Parliament House, New Delhi.

Sardar Sobha Singh was a renowned realistic Painter. His paintings were anatomically true and reflected personality of the subject. All his life he painted the Gurus, *avtars*, prophets and saints. Because of this, he came to be known as a "Divine Artist," a *rishi* – saint, who through his paintings tried to call back the lost man to find his center.

This book is my humble offering to the great teacher Sobha Singh, who enriched my life with his wisdom.

Kulwant Singh Khokhar.  
28 Sept: 2001, Friday.



## Preface

"I introduce you to a wonderful man," said Dr. Karam Singh Grewal, as he brought Sardar Sobha Singh to my house at Batala, in 1972. His warmth, wisdom and saintly personality impressed me immensely. Later, I went to see him with my family, the same year. He had returned from England. I was so much moved by his talks that I took to recording whatever he spoke, mainly on notebooks and sometimes on audiocassettes. In fact, I took notes of his talks whenever we met. I carried my notes for about one-and-half decades and could not work on them.

I had been very close to him. We became family friends right from the beginning. All members of my family respected this saintly person. We were ever eager to go to Andretta at a distance of about one hundred and sixty kilometers from our home in Batala. Sardar Harbir Singh Bhanwar, his wife Mrs. Gurcharan Kaur and their child Hirdaypal Singh stayed with him to take care of the artist and to manage his home. We all developed mutual love and respect for one another.

In June 1985, my wife and I visited our children in the United States of America. I took my notes with me. I rearranged, and compiled them at Chester, Richmond, and at a seaside resort named Ocean Sand. In the USA, I prepared first draft of the manuscript. It was divided into two parts: Part-I was the life story of Dar ji and Part-II contained some of his philosophical reflections.

On my return to India, I added to the manuscript the material from my audiocassette recordings, and other notes. My younger daughter Dr. Arvinder K. Barot, her husband Dr. G.C. Barot, my younger son Gurinder Singh Khokhar and his wife Satinder Kaur Khokhar, were of immense help. They looked after my every convenience to make this job possible. Dar ji went through the manuscript himself. At some places he made some additions, corrections and suggestions with his own hand. He was satisfied with the job done. Bibi Gurcharan Kaur and her son S. Hirdaypal Singh, also rechecked authenticity of the incidences.

In February 1989, I was in the United States again. Despite a major surgery on my back, I spent five to fifteen hours daily, for about six weeks, to manually rewrite the manuscript. My daughter, Dr. Jatinder K. Sidhu, her husband Dr. Baljit Singh Sidhu, my elder son Dr. Manmohan S. Khokhar and his wife

Baljinder K. Khokhar, had been very caring and considerate all through. They provided all necessary facilities enabling me to complete this work. My wife Mrs. Bhagwant Kaur Khokhar, had been a great help and verified what I wrote.

All the facts and details in the book were told to me by the artist himself. I have only tried to pen them down and give them the shape of a book. I have translated his words into English, but as we all know, no language is perfect enough to convey the exact meanings, and subtleties of another language.

In such talks spread over long time, the wide gaps in the script were natural. The same idea was repeated at different times, with variations. I had to bring together, his scattered ideas at one place. I completed sentences, linked the paragraphs or the ideas, and bridged the gaps. As well, the sentences had to be straightened out to make them meaningful. At places, I had to explain the complicated ideas. In such a situation, repetition was bound to occur. Yet, I have tried to maintain the continuity of the narration uninterrupted by making each chapter self-sufficient and self-contained.

Dar ji had a very sharp memory but still we will have to allow a margin for his ripe old age for any variation in date, time, place and person, in his talks spread over about fifteen years.

This book has nothing from my imagination, memory or conjecture. Everything is what the artist himself told me in the last about fifteen years of his life. The book is not simply based on what he said, but is exactly what he kept telling me from time to time. We cannot ignore the fact that editing, besides other things, may focus on making the script concise, precise, and compact. Naturally, this may lead to the loss of some essence of the manuscript. Immaterial, minor variations in the incidences might have cropped up due to long time on which the recording of his talks was spread out. I have S. Sobha Singh's recordings on audiocassettes, 8 mm movie, photographs, his letters, and my diaries. I may plan to gift these to S. Sobha Singh Art Gallery, Andretta, for their safe preservation.

Kulwant Singh Khokhar.  
28 Sept: 2001, Friday.

## MY ART

The art of S. Sobha Singh in his own words.

Everything has its cause and effect and it is the cause that eventually becomes an effect. The important thing is that the cause should be found out instead of discussing the artist i.e. the effect. The cause, which created art in him, should be found out. The art in itself is nothing. Like other forces it is also one. Everything has its classification and the art is a branch of such divisions.

I have been recognized as a painter. This is not something great in itself. I feel completely satisfied with the fulfillment of my deep longings through it. This is what is significant for me. The need is of awakening one's own self. You have to prick, stimulate and excite your own soul. Only then the potential comes out as reality.

You keep on trying to find your justifications out of the books. When you say something, there is nothing new in it. You merely repeat what might have been said by someone a few thousand years ago. It might have been in a book or just a part of folklore. It is different with the paintings. The paintings do not permit finding your own justifications out of them. What these are, these are and there is no flexibility allowing you to fit your mind into them. You have to accept them as such. In the paintings there is no repetition of the old ideas. If you have creativity and you are not simply a copier, you give new dimensions even to the old ideas.

Out of the qualities of a craft, the greatest contribution is the motive in it. The vessel remains the same. All that matters is as to what you have put into that vessel for drinking. An empty bottle will give out the smell of the scent it once contained. The same way, when I am absorbed in painting the Gurus, the higher thoughts arise in me and these keep me thinking great. It is a stage of spiritual elation.

One can become an artist or even a great artist by working hard and not just by sitting near me. A masterpiece may get painted by a dedicated effort and not by sitting near an easel. It is not only the greatness of the painting but it also indicates the growth of the painter. The most significant for an artist is the state of absolute absorption which gives such moments, he himself being unaware of them, in which his body and soul work in perfect harmony. No doubt, such ecstatic moments last for a few strokes of the brush. The first of it is

technique of the painter and this also needs a good amount of practice.

A painting is a creation. The quality matters, not the quantity. Every step of success generates courage. This counts. In the beginning an artist may take up commercial art to earn a living. After that, he starts painting to influence the people. In the end, he paints to enjoy and to derive the bliss. It is done for one's own inner satisfaction and joy.

In an artist, the instinct to be known usually works. He may want to achieve this through his own efforts. If a child is trying to climb a bed and you try to help him, he may get irritated and start crying. By doing so, you deprive the child of the joy of his first attempt. The genius wants the success only in this way. It gives him the satisfaction and pleasure. The instinct of being known and appreciated maintains the growth of his art according to his genius. It is just like the desire of acceptance by his playmates in his childhood, seeking his appreciation by the opposite sex in his youth and venturing for his recognition by the world around him when he matures. He keeps on making efforts and passes through very many adventures. There are only a few whose genius gets fixed up on a goal.

I never painted a woman to project her sensuality. I highlighted the qualities of her with the sole aim to show that the woman was great. As I see it now, I was seeking my mother out of my paintings. It is another thing that a woman may forget her real self, but we have to remember that she has to face many hurdles in her life. I have painted her, ignoring all her shortcomings. I painted her with the appreciation of the lover. I realized that the lovers were great. But, the lovers stay engrossed with their desires only. They never reach the fulfillment. I achieved and enjoyed that.

I turned to saints. I wanted to paint them. I was influenced by their single-minded devotion. But they lived in their longing only. They longed for the one who was beyond reach. This was not acceptable to me.

I got a desire to paint those about whom I had been hearing since I could recognize the turban of my father. I knew that the Panjabis – the people of the Punjab, have a throbbing force of their spirit in their lives. I had been observing the dedication, devotion and the faith of the freedom fighters in their Gurus. I realized that even inspite of all this, the Sikh faith was wavering. To place before them their source of faith, I painted the Gurus who, to my mind, were the ideal men. Passing

through various stages of the development of my philosophy, I started painting the Sikh Gurus. This is the ultimate of my aim and I myself keep evolving in it.

When you do not allow yourself to get stuck to one thing, that is your growth. I never made any fixed idea. I painted whatever appealed to me according to my stage of development.

In spite of the fact that the Sikhs were deteriorating morally, the spirit, which the Gurus had infused into them, was still alive. To make them realize their ideal, my subject ultimately became the Sikh Gurus. I tried to stabilize the wavering faith of the Sikhs and put a check on this downward trend. This has been my contribution towards the regeneration of the community.

In my philosophy, religion comes at number one, the sex at number two and the sense of possession at number three, in directing the lives of the people in general. The religion is mental and the sex represents the physical aspect of a person. The religion should protect the spiritual side of man. When the stamp of the religion is affixed on him, then the whole thing gets lost. He becomes possessive. He should have taken the essence of the religion and left the rest. Now, he tolerates none and is tolerated by none. Unparalleled atrocities have been committed in the name of religion. It is not the fault of religion but the ecclesiastics have always misused it. By painting the Gurus, Prophets and other incarnations, my effort was to help the people realize their primordial essence.

I do not attach much importance to the art itself, but I do give much importance to the expression in it. The art is a medium, may be it is painting, poetry, literature or music. The significance lies in the fact that the man in the artist should not be asleep and it should be fully awake. There should be no animal-man but the spiritual man in him who should be able to awaken the masses. He uses symbols to manifest that who is not manifest.

The crude form should be removed from whatever has gone by. Instead the artist should take up its ideal form and present it through some individual as a symbol in his painting. It is very important that the ideal he wants to place before others should be there in him, too. The symbol and the reality should be one and the same thing for him, and the artist should have full conviction in it so that the others can have faith in what he

presents. Even inspite of this, a successful artist is he who has been able to understand and love the humanity at large.

The art has its own limitations. One of the governing factors is the man behind it. A pistol in the hands of a kid may harm him and others, a saint may use it and protect someone, whereas a dacoit is sure to commit crime with it. The weapon is the same. The pistol in itself is a means only. Similarly, art is also one. What matters is the genius of the artists. One paints nature or the human figures. The other illustrates the inner man. The gradation depends on his perception, faculty, understanding, likes, dislikes and on his realization of his ideal. Such a true man is always within us but it is covered up by mammon. The artist has to remove these covers and bring him out for others to see this.

Kalidas – a poet, praising a goddess, starts his narration from her feet and ends it on her forehead. Describing a charming woman, he begins his description from the parted hair on her head and stops at her silk-smooth things. What he chose in a goddess he did not touch in a common woman. He looked for maturity in the goddess and youth in the woman. He beheld woman through her sensuality. Through his devotion for the goddess he brought out her godliness.

The individual efforts of the painter-artist may be classified under the generalization of the realistic, abstract, imaginative, classical, progressive, modern and ultra-modern art according to its region of origin and practice. It was also labeled as Kangra, Moghul, Rajput, Bangla, etc. The Kangra Art is the first craft. Very minute details are given and every detail is finished very craftily. In it there is an (unsuccessful) effort to bring in the perspective but creativeness is lacking. Basauli is the place where the Kangra Art was born. The Raja of Kangra was married at Basauli. In his dowry, he got two artists as well. Two or three Moghul artists, turned out by Emperor Aurangzeb from his court in Delhi, also came to this Raja. The joint effort of all of them brought into being what is now known as the Kangra Art. This joint venture covered the period of about thirty years, from 1776 to 1806.

On the other hand, the Rajput Art has force in its lines but it lacks naturalness. The artists draw the nose long, delicately thin, with unrealistic curve. They make the eyes very large and drawn out and the chins, which are not as these actually are. The beauty is of course there in this art.

Muslims were prohibited to draw the human figures lest these were used for worship by those people. The Moghul Art, therefore, had no choice but to originate from the figures of the plants and vines, giving expression to their aesthetic sense. Later, the transformation included into it the gradual appearance of the birds and the animals. The sense of sin and guilt was strongly attached to the human figure. Therefore, that originality failed to come up and develop, but they gave great refinement to the lines in which they captured it. The same way, the Bangla and Madras Arts were evolved. They were typified by the round faces, black eyes, etc.

The Western Art that is generally believed to be the product of the west, had mainly the religion before it. Later, the ideal and constructive subjects were also taken up. There is not much for me to say about the so-called Sikh Art. Such things develop when the people get a breathing time. The cultures are produced by the calm, peaceful periods. Till the turbulent waters do not become calm, how can the things in the depth be seen? Unfortunately, the Sikh history, especially the early Sikh history has been marked by turbulence.

The fact remains that we cannot define that this art is this or that art. One may have more of Moghul in it, the other more of Rajput and still other Basauli. I think that the art may be it is music, painting, literature, science or politics, is to help in the evolution of life. If these do not help the development of it, then they are nothing. In itself the art is a faculty only. With this you may paint the devil or divine. It will not protest as to why you are painting this or that. The duty of an artist is to keep in mind the spiritual and emotional problems of the people and the needs of the time and to draw such things which by their direct approach or by indirections uplift the man and help his moral development in society.

We should not try to give a name to the art as we are in the habit of naming everything. The art is a medium and it becomes a style according to the faculty of the artist. The main thing is that one has to reach a goal and here it does not matter as to through which way or medium one reaches there. The name of the method adopted has no significance. Sohni had to reach Mahiwal. She reached him and did not wait for a transport or an auspicious or convenient time. An earthen pitcher was handy and she used it to cross the river so as to meet him.

The technique of the art is a means and so it cannot be defined because it is individual with each artist. The

development of the art in one is a smooth flow having no beginning and no end. Consciously or unconsciously one absorbs the benefits of the experiences of the others. His own work keeps paving its own way for its development. Therefore, the technique of an individual keeps on changing from time to time. Another factor is the need of the artist to earn a living. The technique keeps on mixing up. The Kangra, Rajput and other arts keep on taking something from one another. The technique is strictly individual and one acquires it with a lot of effort and hard work. Therefore, there is no need to bother to understand the techniques of the others and no one can do anything for the development of the technique of any one else. One gets it with his own hard work and out of the ocean he may fill up a pot or a pitcher according to his own capacity or capability.

I need not to have a view about my own art. I can only tell as to what my desire or wish is. At the most, I can define my approach only. It is not possible to affix a stamp of an artist on his work. He picked up one thing from here and the other from there beside his own originality. All these combined to give an individuality to his art. There are physicians and out of them some may be specialists. Out of the specialists, one may have deep and penetrating knowledge whereas the other may just be a superficial one. My own background, circumstances and mental make-up and my efforts add up to give me my individual style.

If you label mine as the Punjabi art, then every Punjabi does not paint my way. I cannot be a realistic artist even. If the subject is Mahatma Buddha, one painter may give the calm and the other a troubled expression to his work. One may use his imagination and the other may need a model. I cannot be termed as a Sikh artist either. One carpenter makes a toy and the other builds a coach. The difference is not only in the degree but in the stage of the development, too. If I am called a religious artist, then we will have to define the religion first. If I am a devotional artist, then there comes in a thin veil because a devout fails to reach the creative heights, as the devotion is a longing only. It is good in itself because in it there is a wish to reach the highest stage. In fact, the important thing is as to what I think of art and what is my conception of it. As to how the art developed in one is a secondary thing. The development of the indication for the Religious Art depends on one's own lifestyle. Ultimately, we are left with defining the art with no adjectives attached to it. There is nothing that can be labeled as my art.



What I have said for myself is a generalization for the art and the artists.

I want to paint a perfect man. He should be all forgiving and all forgetting. You may name the aggregate of such qualities as Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh or any other prophet or incarnation. By virtue of the compilation and combination of their qualities, their greatness should influence the mind of the people and this should encourage them to become like them. By painting Guru Nanak and the Buddha, I want to convey that it happened, it should happen and that it can happen right now. I bring together the past, present and future in my work. This can be done only if your subject is an ideal man who can be placed before others as an example for them to emulate. Such great men gave discipline to the world and they brought the higher values of life under one flag of "the Humanity".

Rather than giving you a discourse on the higher values, I make a portrait of a man depicting those and I place it before you. If this is Guru Nanak, I need not explain what the great man did and through which ordeals he had to pass. Thus I paint a face of the benevolent man who fears none, frightens none and only blesses everyone out of his grace. If such an all-embracing personality happens to pass by you, in that fleeting moment you may not be able to get any benefit. If there is his painting, that is forever with you, You may look at that again and again and for any length of time you please. If you have lost your center, you are frustrated, you are disappointed, you have suffered a loss and desperation has visited you then, you simply stand before this painting. Out of its all-loving and all-understanding contours, you will get your hope and solace. This is all that I want.

I have standardized the paintings of the Gurus which will be acceptable to the man of today as much as to the man of tomorrow. A need for it arose, because this is an era of science and even a child wants to know the how and why of everything and it has to be explainable in a painting. My effort is to eliminate the confusions produced by the way the Gurus have been painted by other artists. If I get a bit of more lease of my life, I will paint the Gurus at the level of human understanding so that even a man of common intellect can understand what the Gurus command and demand, and he tries to rise to that highest level by following their dictates.

If torch-light is thrown on something, this makes the object visible. Nothing manifests if the light is turned towards the

sky. The same way, the light gets easily fixed on an object. To stay within Sikh philosophy, it is to get light reflected from this object and not to worship it (The light of knowledge and understanding).

My aim is to paint the Sikh Gurus and this is my religion. I try to give form to that which is formless. I do not think of selling my such paintings for money only. I do very much long that these be propagated for the benefit of the masses, for their spiritual and moral uplift.

The evolution of my paintings and that of mine is interlinked. I keep on growing as my paintings grow. The evolution of my paintings is my own evolution. I see my past, present and future in these paintings. Therein, I behold the integrated growth of my paintings. The philosophy of the trinity that it had been done, it can be done, it should be done, depicted in the paintings of the great man is not merely a manifestation of devotion, but it encompasses divine intelligence, perception and conception.

I can call Guru Nanak an artist. Out of his perfection, with his affectionate approach to the humanity, he tried to build up goodness of the fellow beings. You may call him a reformer or a prophet. Unless you make a prophecy, you cannot bring in the reform. You know that you will give this medicine and it will bring in the cure. Guru Nanak knew that he had to give to the people their guiding wish to awaken them so that they could live a purposeful and ethical life with honor and dignity. However, you may paint the Gurus as best as you can, it will have different effect on the followers of the different faiths. This is because the painting represents a symbol, which the artist wants to give to others. They may or may not be acceptable to any one. Guru Nanak is the symbol of goodness but others may take him as representing the Sikhs only. The reason is that their vision of knowledge has not yet developed and they cannot go beyond the "form". They draw joy out of the form only. A person with wisdom goes beyond the colors, lines and forms. Anything will give pleasure proportionate to the depth and angle with which we observe it.

In England, the television people asked my opinion about, "The art is long and the life is short." I told them, the life is not short and the art is not long. The art is a compensation for life. In fact, it is not possible to measure both of them. The life is ever lasting. Due to disharmony in the God made and the man made laws the gaps and the pits come up in life. The art is to

level these up. The art is for life, may be it is painting, music or literature. The life is not for it. Nothing can be greater than the life and the life is the greatest of all. This is the life for which the people do everything, good or bad, to keep it going. The life has its another aspect of its grace that is the bliss. This is the mental aspect of the life. Other aspects of the life are the sentimental, and the carnal.

The carnal life has its own greatness. People sacrifice this to preserve its higher form saying, "We will not bow to the untruth." The life has its stages and it is sad if we do not understand them. The life is there in the seed, fully grown tree, leaves of the trees and in the flowers. The leaves fall, decay, and turn into manure to give life to the tree. It is one continuous process. If you give the time limit to different stages of life, then the charm is lost. You must leave them free without imposing any boundaries on them. This life is the art of the Lord!

There is nothing like the contemporary artists. The different artists who live in one time-period differ in their individuality according to their faculty, aim and dedicated work. Some give themselves the label of progressive artists. Others found some other nomenclature for their art. There are mostly those who start running after their name, money and fame without any message within.

# I HERITAGE

## **Hargobindpur**

About fifty miles south of Amritsar, the cultural and religious capital of Sikhs, is situated the town named Sri Hargobindpur. It was founded by Guru Hargobind (1595-1644), the sixth Guru of the Sikhs, on the land which earlier belonged to Chandu Shah, a wealthy banker and revenue official at the Mughal court in Lahore. Chandu Shah had played a role in the arrest and execution of Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru of the Sikhs. Emperor Jahangir (1569-1627) is said to have adopted a conciliatory approach towards Guru Hargobind after the latter's release from the fort of Gwalior and even handed over Chandu Shah to Guru Hargobind for awarding him whatever punishment he thought fit. Earlier, this place was called Ruhela after the name of a Muslim Nawab.

When the Guru reached this place after the death of Chandu Shah at Lahore, a local landlord, Bhagwan Das Ghorar by name, objected to the Guru's arrival. A skirmish took place on 28 September 1621 in which Bhagwan Das was killed. His son, Ratan Chand, and Chandu Shah's son, Karam Chand, sought help from the *faujdar* of Jalandhar against the Guru to avenge the killing of their fathers. Another skirmish took place on 4th October 1621 but the Mughal forces were repulsed. Both these actions took place in the vicinity of Ruhela. It was here on the land which belonged to Chandu Shah that the Guru founded a new township, Sri Hargobindpur, on the southern bank of the Beas. The town was bothered by floods. It is said that Guru Hargobind shot an arrow and said, "Flood water will not cross the mark where the arrow falls." There was a *pipal* tree at this point and it was washed away in the 1957 floods.

## **Grandparents**

In the 19th century, this township was made a new abode by a tall and stout Sikh. He was an expert horseman who could accurately hit the target from a running horse. Once, Maharaja Ranjit Singh had witnessed him standing on a running horse with a bowl from which the milk did not spill. The Maharaja immediately took him into his army. He was in the Sikh army which fought the second Anglo-Sikh war (1848-49). His body got riddled with bullets, but he escaped by swimming

across the river Beas with two other companions. They came out on the southern bank of the river at Sri Hargobindpur. This brave warrior, Charhat Singh by name, settled here, married and had three sons, the youngest being Deva Singh. Charhat Singh was grand father, and Deva Singh father of Sobha Singh.

### **Birth**

Deva Singh (birth 1852), a tall and striking figure, became a *Risaldar* and retired as a Surveyor in the army. He served the army for twenty years and was relieved at the age of 45 years. Deva Singh continued to keep his residence at Sri Hargobindpur. He married Hari and had a daughter Lachhmi from her. Hari died before his retirement. After his retirement he married Achhran. She was a widow, with a girl-child named Kishna Devi, nicknamed Nicki. Achhran, was the daughter of Nihal Singh of Harchhowal, a village about 5 miles away from Sri Hargobindpur. From this wedlock were born Mangat Singh and Sobha Singh. Elder son Mangat Singh, died at the age of four. Sobha Singh was born on 13 Maghar (midnight), Wednesday, 29 November 1901, in Julahianwali Gali at Sri Hargobindpur, District Gurdaspur, Punjab, India.

Sobha Singh had two stepsisters, one from his father's first marriage and the other from his mother's earlier marriage. Lachhmi was married to Mangal Singh, an overseer, and Kisna devi to Khazan Singh. Lachhmi was ten years older to Sobha Singh. Sobha Singh earned international repute as an artist.

Achhran was much attached to the memory of her late husband and had to remarry because of social and economic constraints. Deva Singh could not tolerate his wife's attachment even to the memory of another man, and their married life remained unenviable throughout.

Deva Singh, was a soldier by profession, and was a good draftsman and proficient in watercolor painting. He could mend his shoes, repair his watch, and could do mason's work well. He was a devout Sikh, jovial, kind hearted, and a good shot like his father. Achhran was beautiful, delicate, soft-spoken, and a person with fine aesthetic sense. Her inclination towards her parents was not acceptable to Deva Singh. Sobha Singh seems to have inherited the artistic inclination from his father and aesthetic sensibility from his mother.

An incident happened when Sobha Singh was just about four years of age. This left an indelible imprint on the

impressionable mind of this young child and consequently throughout his remaining life he remained very sensitive to human feelings of suffering and privation. As it happened, his mother contracted tuberculosis. Sobha Singh was merely two years old by then. There was no one else except Deva Singh in the family to look after and nurse her and he did not care much for her. She had to move to her parents at Harchhowal, but Sobha Singh remained with his father. His half-sister, Lachhmi, started looking after the two and gradually the boy became very much attached to her.

### **Death of Mother**

Achhnan contracted tuberculosis, and was treated first at Batala and then at Harchhowal. In two years' time she was reduced to a skeleton. She felt her end was near and wished to see Sobha Singh. His father feared infection and did not want to send young Sobha Singh to her. After great persuasion he allowed the dying mother to have a glimpse of her son. She was carried on a cot to Sri Hargobindpur. The irony was that on reaching there, the cot was placed in the verandah of her own house. Deva Singh covered Achhnan's face with a thin muslin cloth so that Sobha Singh should not see her horrid face and was also safe from infection. The son was made to stand some distance away from his mother's cot. Her arms moved and only then the boy became aware that someone was there on the cot. Through that thin cloth he saw the tears in his mother's eyes. She stretched out her arms to hug her son, but Deva Singh jerked back Sobha Singh by his shoulder. Instantly, the mother's arms fell down listless and she breathed her last. The four-year-old dumb-founded innocent boy was too young to comprehend or react to the reality of the situation. The relatives gathered there, started crying. Deva Singh, quickly took his son out. Of course, he came to realize the death of his mother.

Sobha Singh kept shuttling for twelve years between Sri Hargobindpur where lived his father, and his half-sister Lachhmi. Sobha Singh had taken after his mother, much to the annoyance of his father. His father was superstitious and he considered his birth to be the cause of his wife's death. He had a rather ambivalent relationship with Sobha Singh. He loved him as his only son, but at the same time hated him under the mistaken superstitious belief of being the cause of Achhnan's untimely

death. This made the young boy sensitive, irritable, self-absorbed and a dreamer.

### **Education**

The education of Sobha Singh also suffered heavily. He kept moving to Lahore, Pathankot and Gurdaspur. After his 5th class, he came back to Sri Hargobindpur, purchased the books for his sixth class, studied for a time, but could not appear in the examination. The circumstances, in fact, made Sobha Singh disinterested in all academic matters. He missed classes frequently and loitered about on the river bank making figures on sand with his finger and sculpturing the sand stones with his penknife, or a piece of tin. This left a trail of his wanderings and he could be easily traced along the river bank, or hiding in the deep cuts made by erosion of the high river bank.

In 1914, when Sobha Singh was studying at a school in Gurdaspur, the school was visited by Mr. Adwyer. Sobha Singh was late by ten minutes. All the students in the rows were restless except one who kept composed and alert throughout. He was the son of a Raja of a small state. He was thin and lean but was smartly dressed. His father came to him at short intervals, dusted his black long coat and asked if he needed anything. The Raja kept standing about ten feet away from his son and his servants were also present close by. The boy asked for water. The servant brought a pitcher of cold water carried on the head of the school peon. The Raja told him to give water to all the students present there starting from one end, and his own son got the water on his own turn without any discrimination.

Adwyer shook hands with the Raja and asked, "Is he your son?" Sobha Singh watched all this with queer interest. The Raja lived near Hanuman Gate. In the evening Sobha Singh went to that side and saw from a distance that the Raja sat in a chair under a guava tree and his son was pressing his legs. The affection between the father and the son became obvious to him. Sobha Singh had an unsatiated hunger for the love of his father. This scene made a deep impact on his impressionable mind.

The small sleepy town of Sri Hargobindpur, perched on the high bank of the river Beas, had a very lovely panorama - the river with expansive sand, tall, waving reed grass, calmly flowing river and hazy snow-covered mountains in the distant background. In the town, women drawing water from the well, and the cattle returning home with their jingling bells around

their necks, raising dust in their wake with red glow of sunset as the backdrop, presented a memorable scene in the evening. This natural beauty was awakening in Sobha Singh the nascent artist, which in fact, he inherited from his father.

### **Development**

While at School, Sobha Singh used to sketch the faces of his classmates on their notebooks. In exchange they would do his homework or any other odd job he asked them to. He used all his notebooks for drawings rather than doing any other schoolwork on them. He was delicate in built but stubborn. He often quarreled and clashed with several of his schoolmates or playmates. His father, frustrated as he was, encouraged him to pay back the ruffians in the same coin. This developed in him freedom of thought and action – fearlessness. The pranks of Sobha Singh sometimes annoyed his father a lot as he would follow his own instinct alone, and would not listen to anyone.

Once Sobha Singh kept out all the day. On returning home, he found door of the house locked. Both the father and son only lived alone in the house. He jumped over the boundary wall into the house. He had hardly picked the food from the hanging basket when his father arrived and opened the outer door. Fearing a beating, Sobha Singh ran upstairs and jumped on to the adjoining roof of the weaver's house. His father followed him waving a stick, yelling and scolding. The next roof was at a lower level. Sobha Singh hid into the angle made by it, but soon getting scared he left the cover and took to his heels. His father angrily hurled the stick which just missed him. Tara Singh Sajadkalya happened to see all this. He was coming from the opposite direction. He severely reprimanded Deva Singh, saying, "Had the weakling been hit, he would have died. The boy was hungry and he had to jump over the wall. He committed no sin." Sajadkalya reassured the boy and took him back to his father.

Deva Singh never tried to read the mind of his son who used to run away to avoid the wrath of his father. Once, the boy hid himself in the Gurdwara Damdama Sahib in the town. It was evening. He went to sleep in the four-foot wide passage around the twenty-five foot square hall. Being unaware, the priest locked the door in the evening, as was his wont, and went away to his residence some distance away. The boy got up hungry in the middle of night and found the door closed. He cried, and



thumped the door but to no avail. He found there puffed rice and raised sugar cakes, and ate them. Weeping and sobbing, he went to sleep again, and dreamed of Guru Hargobind addressing him, "O boy, you will not die of hunger. You have still to make my paintings." He felt much consoled. The next morning the priest was surprised to find child Sobha Singh there and took him to his father.

One day, running out of the room, Sobha Singh hit the kerosene lamp on the floor and broke its chimney. His father lost his temper and slapped him hard on the face. In resentment the boy left home, wailing and weeping. He did not come back till late in the evening. The boy hurried away in anger and did not leave his telltale trail of his drawings. The desperate relatives tried their best but failed to locate him. The boy went to sleep under a banyan tree at night. When he felt cold, he sneaked into a small cave nearby. He was traced the next day and restored to his father. He brought the boy back to the place of his hiding. Finding it to be a grave, Deva Singh felt very sad at the plight of this motherless child. He asked him, "Did not that corpse eat you up?" Sobha Singh had been unaware of this fact during his hiding, but now he felt so scared at the sight that he never passed by that place again even during the day. It was for the first time that he saw any grave.

The sketching and painting became a major pastime for the boy. Even at the age of seven, Sobha Singh could draw and paint well. He needed money to purchase paper, paint and brushes for his hobby. He had no money of his own, nor could he ask his father for it fearing his wrath. He had no alternative but to pinch money from his father's desk. This he did in a deft manner.

His father had purchased a stamp vendor's desk in an auction from a post office. He kept his cash in that with its statement. The boy would take some money and alter the statement in his father's forged handwriting. This baffled his father, but he could not detect the trick for some time.

There was a marriage ceremony in the neighborhood. Sobha Singh made a welcome banner in beautiful Gurmukhi characters cut out of the golden paper and pasted on a red cloth. His father appreciated it very much, but at the same time he also became suspicious. He called Sobha Singh to him and dictated him something to write in Gurmukhi letters. When he was asked to write the numerals, the truth dawned on the boy and realizing that he has been found out, he bolted off.

On his run, he saw a group of boys following a man in handcuffs. He had snatched the necklace of a lady. The boys were shouting, "Thief, Thief". He did not know as to what the term 'thief' really meant and in the crowd he could not see the thief's face. He ran back to his father and asked, "What a thief looks like?" Deva Singh brought a mirror and placed it before his son. Seeing his own face in the mirror, Sobha Singh was mortified and a shiver of shame ran down his spine. With repentance, he begged pardon and promised not to repeat the mischief. He resolved to lead a noble life. However, the experiment left him with a beautiful Gurmukhi handwriting.

In the courtyard of his father's house was a loft above the kitchen, about four feet square and three-and-a-half feet high, with openings on two sides. Sobha Singh was greatly attached to this loft. On auspicious days, he would plaster cow dung and mud paste to its floor, spread a piece of an old worn out carpet, place a low small cot there and on that he would open the 'scripture' (*Panj Granthi* – a collection of 5 scriptures). He shaped an oil lamp out of dough for light and burnt incense. The holy book was written in a running hand and so he could not read that, but he believed that it was something holy and so it should be revered. He used to see his father saying his prayer and read out portions from it. This had cultivated in him a feeling of reverence for this collection of some select hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib - the Holy Book of Sikhs.

Much later, when he could understand it, he realized that the loft symbolized his desire for a home where he could enjoy independence and harmony, and the *Panj Granthi* represented unfolding of his spirituality which was essential to face the harsh realities of life. The home for the boy was the transformation of his search for love and beauty i.e. mother, whom he had lost in his childhood. The home to him was a place throbbing with life full of affection and love.

Broken home and a rather harsh father, at times made Sobha Singh to feel depressed. He felt like putting an end to his miserable life. Around this time he heard of a man dying of pneumonia. He learnt that the pneumonia was caused by exposure. He ran through the sand dunes and when wet with sweat, jumped into the ice-cold water of the river's off shoot. He came out and lied down on the sand, but he did not catch even a common cold not to speak of pneumonia. On the other hand, all this exercise made him feel hungry and he satiated his hunger by eating raw *sangharas* (tropiocas – fruit of a waterplant) from

the creek. Exercise and full stomach gave him energy and courage. He declared to himself, "Hell with Bapu. I am not going to die. I will live to fulfill the divine design." This helped him to overcome his depression and live a purposeful life.

Such pranks of Sobha Singh were no more a family secret. The daughter-in-law of Rai Sahib was a kind-hearted woman and was called, "Bibi ji" – revered sister. She sent her servant to find out Sobha Singh. He located him on the dune beside a creek, and brought him home. She felt concerned for the child who was going wayward because his father was unable to handle him properly. She could restrain herself no more and knocked at Deva Singh's door. He came out and she chided him for meting out this sort of treatment to his only son. She first introduced herself to Deva Singh and on his asking for the reason of her unexpected visitation, she said, "I have come to ask you as to how many children you have got?" He made an abrasive reply, "Of course, only this wretched, unfortunate, wild fellow who bothers me so much and it hardly makes a difference whether he is here or not. He had been away for full two days and did not care for my distress." Bibi ji retorted, "He is motherless. You have to be his father and mother both. The children commit minor mistakes and you too might have done so in your childhood. Don't be so harsh. All this is your fault." With this she warned, "I will tell it to Rai Sahib if the boy runs away again."

This gentle lady was the daughter-in-law of Karam Chand Puri, a retired judge who lived at Sri Hargobindpur in the neighborhood of Deva Singh. He was respected by the people and was addressed by his title of Rai Sahib. His only son was a drunkard and died young, and he had no other issue. His daughter in law (Bibi ji) came from a noble family and was soft spoken as well as compassionate. She was very sympathetic towards Sobha Singh and he had great reverence for her.

Rai Karam Chand and his brother built a village and after his father's name they named it Himatpur. The mansions of that family are still there in the town of Sri Hargobindpur. Bibi was kind by nature. She was sympathetic to Sobha Singh at the death of his mother. Moved by the harshness of his father, she cared more for this motherless child. She felt that his father had failed to fill up his son's need for a mother. She always rescued the boy from the tyranny of his father.

Sobha Singh got attached to Bibi ji and developed respect for her. Whenever he slipped away from his house, she

sent her servant Phirtu to find him out. She often shared with him the tasty dishes prepared by her. She cared for Sobha Singh with a special affection. Bibi had high opinion about the mother of Sobha Singh. He came to learn much about his mother from her that she was beautiful, wise, gentle, as well as very tolerant. This awakened in him a longing for his mother and he saw her in Bibi ji. Sobha Singh developed an attachment with whatever was linked with his mother. He adored her kitchen where she had painted birds and animals on one of its walls.

Deva Singh was uncompromisingly harsh towards his son even when the latter got his left hip dislocated at the age of ten by slipping down the gate of Rai Sahib's house. Lachhmi took him to Amritsar and treated him with sesame oil massage so much that no defect was detected at the time of his recruitment in the army. In 1946 a jolt in the Bus accident again had a malevolent effect on his old injury, which even after treatment rendered his left leg shorter by five inches and he had to live with it throughout his life.

Deva Singh suffered from the sense of loneliness. So did Sobha Singh. The old and ailing father could not look after his son, keep up the household, and cook the food. In 1913 he moved to Amritsar along with Sobha Singh to stay with his daughter Lachhmi. There he died as a frustrated man at the age of 68, leaving behind the sixteen-year lad to face on his own the hostilities of the world.

## II STRUGGLE

Sobha Singh did not develop an interest in his studies at school. He used to miss his classes frequently and instead passed his time drawing and painting. After the death of his father, his sister Lachhmi got him admitted in 1917, to the Industrial School at Amritsar to learn drawing and carpentry. The Principal of the school noted the talent of an artist in Sobha Singh and encouraged him to paint the portraits. He stayed in the school for nine months. In 1918 he went to Gurdaspur to learn new crafts and there he made some friends.

### **Jallianwala Bagh**

Sobha Singh was at the Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, when General Dyer ordered the massacre there. He fell down in the stampede and got buried under the dying and falling people, but had a providential escape. It seems as if he was saved for some higher purpose. A little before that towards the end of 1918, he had joined army as a draftsman. He worked at Amritsar Cantonment but still stayed with his sister Lachhmi. One day, she gave him and her son *khichri* - a salted dish made of rice and cereals, to eat. Sobha Singh felt that she had done partiality by adding more ghee – butter oil, to her son's dish. He felt hurt and angrily pushed the dish away in protest. Lachhmi scolded him, but he could not bear this unjust attitude. Sobha Singh borrowed ten rupees from a neighbor and left for Delhi. He went straight to the recruiting office and got enrolled into army as a draftsman. On 12 October, 1919, he left for Basra-Baghdad.

### **Basra, Baghdad**

At Basra, the batch of Sobha Singh was placed in the camp Margel. The transport did not arrive to take them to their destination, for more than a week. They were ordered to march through eighty miles of sandy tract to camp at Mosul, near Baghdad. Zaman Ali, who was senior in age and rank to Sobha Singh was also in that batch. He was on deputation from the Indian Railways. Sobha Singh helped Zaman Ali in this tough journey and at places he had to carry him on his back. Lt. Col. W.S. Glover, seeing the blisters on the feet of Sobha Singh, became sympathetic towards him. Zaman Ali and Sobha Singh

became good friends. The younger fellow did the drawings for both and the older one took care of all the cooking and the household.

Col. Glover and three other Europeans had painting as their hobby. Sobha Singh observed them painting on the canvas. They helped him in color mixing and painting technique, but Sobha Singh basically remained a self-taught artist. He believed that his trait of painting came with birth, and later, it sprouted and blossomed by its own self. A craftsman has the keen eye to pick up something new. A teacher cannot give anything to his student and the student himself has to get whatever he wants out of him. Sobha Singh could not afford to join an art school and he had to rely on his own observations and experiments to evolve his art. Art was a gift of nature to him.

When Sobha Singh was away to Baghdad, he received tidings from Lachmi that her husband, Mangal Singh, had lost everything in his business. The failure depressed him and he died quite young. Sobha Singh regularly sent enough money to support his widowed sister. She had brought up Sobha Singh from his childhood. He had to live with her at Amritsar when he was merely eight years old. He accompanied her family to Lahore when her husband was transferred there. Sobha Singh picked up basic skills in scale drawing from her husband (His brother-in-law) Mangal Singh, who was a draftsman. He felt he had the moral obligation to help his sister in that hour of distress. He himself had simple habits and thus could easily afford to send money to her after meeting his own expenses.

Colonel Glover was much pleased and impressed by the politeness, simple habits, honesty, talent, efficiency and hard work of Sobha Singh, and he took the young man on his staff. Sobha Singh earned quick promotions, and became head draughtsman within one year. Sobha Singh's gentle nature endeared him to others as well. Once, he was going to Orgal on an official tour and his only companion in the compartment of the train was a charming little girl of about twelve years. Noticing that she wanted to look out of the window, he gave his own seat to her. After some time she started vomiting incessantly. He got worried. On the next stop, he got a spoon of whisky from an army major in the next compartment and gave it to her. This relieved the girl somewhat. She narrated the story to her parents who were there to receive her at Orgal. They were so pleased that they made Sobha Singh her local guardian and

started sending the monthly allowance of their daughter through him.

Sobha Singh had one full apartment to himself, at rupees 50 per month. His colleagues lived in the single rooms. The people of Baghdad resented Indians, because they were under the British Rule and England was at war with their country. Their women enticed Indians, who were killed and dumped into the septic tank toilets where even their bones dissolved without leaving any trace of crime. The landlady, a widow of about forty-five, was good at heart but was very strict. It was her standing order for every tenant to return to the building by 9.30 P.M.

Once, Sobha Singh felt depressed and sad. He took leave from his job, kept wandering all the day on his motorbike and returned at about 10.30 P.M., after dining outside. The landlady came out annoyed when he knocked at the door, but she calmed down on seeing his sullen face and inquired, "What's wrong? Are you okay? Where is your family?" She was sorry to learn that he had no family. He started thinking of making a family, from that time.

Whenever unhappy, Sobha Singh started painting his friends and relatives. Colonel Glover appreciated the artist in him and liked his paintings. Glover started polishing his English and lent him *The Pleasures of Life* by Lord Avebury. This was his first English book which he read with interest and thereafter reading became an obsession with him. He often watched Lt. Rigdon painting, but did not befriend him because of his unclean personal life. Sobha Singh was fond of music and occasionally attended such parties organized by his friends and others. He lived in style because of his clean habits, while others wasted their money on licentious living.

Sobha Singh was distinguished for good manners, spotless living and for keeping his place clean and tidy. His colleagues were mostly shabby and unkempt. They wined, dined, gambled and smoked. They spent their pay on their shady activities. Some of them had no bed or bedding even. Sobha Singh lived in nicely in comparison with them.

At Mosul, in Iraq, where Sobha Singh now put up, the Tigris (Dajla) river met Euphrates (Frat) and they discharged into Arabian Sea at Shat Al Arab. He had a cozy bedding in his *landi* (Cottage). Over the bed, he had hung a canopy of waterproof sheet to protect it from any rainwater leaking from the tent. He covered empty wooden crates with blankets and used them as a table and a chair. Empty liquor bottles left by

his friends were his flower vases. Whenever he could get, he burnt incense sticks to freshen his room.

One day, Sobha Singh was sound asleep when there blew a strong storm, while his colleagues were engaged in gambling and drinking. They could not sleep because they had no proper beddings. Out of mischief they made a cut in the sagging canopy and severed one of the strings which were holding it. The water collected in the canopy dumped on to Sobha Singh. He became wet to his skin and could not sleep. He reported the matter to Col. Glover at 2 o'clock in the midnight. The Colonel court-marshaled and heavily fined his companions who were at fault. This punishment to the friends upset Sobha Singh and it was on his intervention that they were pardoned, but they had to compensate him with a new bedding through deductions from their salaries.

Sobha Singh was contented with his job. He had good friends, distinguished acquaintances, a good collection of books and ample time for his painting. On completing his contract with the army, he returned to India. On return home, he met some old friends and relatives, but soon rejoined the army. Once again he was dispatched to Baghdad and posted in Margel as a draftsman in the electrical and mechanical section of the powerhouse.

#### **Awakening for Marriage**

Margel was ten miles from Barsa. Daood, a Jew by faith, worked as a clerk in the office where Sobha Singh was serving. Daood told Sobha Singh that he had got married. Sobha Singh jokingly asked for a treat and Daood retorted, "But, not in a crowd." After three months he invited him to his house one evening. When Sobha Singh reached there, Daood was not yet home. His wife received him with a smile. She was happy and excited. On inquiry about his friend, she said, "He should be home soon. He will bring nice things for you. He is fond of you and talks high of you." She kept him entertained with her small talks. She knew English a little bit and he did not know Arabic. After some time the bell rang. She hurriedly wiped the chair-seat and opened the door. It was not Daood but someone else. Again the bell rang, she cleaned the chair and opened the door. It was a lady from the neighborhood. Bell rang third time. She tidied the chair and opened the door. Daood was there. He had a small bag in his hand. She received him with delight, and joyfully exclaimed, "Didn't I tell he will bring nice things for you, he loves



you?" She kept smiling all the time. Sobha Singh was spell bound for two hours with them and thought, "If this is marriage, it is a good thing." Sobha Singh returned home intoxicated with the feeling of love and devotion he had witnessed between the young partners. He realized that marriage could really be a bliss. The brief experience of a loving and affectionate family atmosphere in their home made him change his earlier view that marriage was an unwelcome event and it caused only bickering and trouble to both the partners. Coinciding with this experience, a big, black, soft pelted cat started visiting him and it would slip into his bed for sleeping. If he tried to get her out, it growled.

The very next day of his visiting Daood, he applied for his repatriation. Captain Ingles came with his application in his hand and inquired, "You sent this, Sobha Singh?" He said, "Yes, Sir". "You never talked of it before?" The Captain said and forwarded the application to the Divisional Officer, Colonel Lot.

The Colonel returned the application for more details. Sobha Singh explained to Ingles that he was twenty-two, wanted to marry and settle down as an artist-painter. Ingles laughed, "Will the art earn you bread? In England the artists die penniless." Col. Lot also tried to dissuade him from seeking repatriation, but Sobha Singh was determined and stuck to his decision. Ingles wanted him to come back after marriage, but he did not commit.

About one month before returning to India, a friend wanted Sobha Singh to accompany him to a movie. He was going through papers and signing them. He did not leave any job undone. His friend waited for some time and then gave a hearty laugh. Sobha Singh wanted to know the cause for that laughter, but his friend kept evading. On their way back from the movie Sobha Singh insisted and his friend said, "I laughed at the idea that your mother brought you forth to sign the papers only. It was the job of a Clerk." "No", said Sobha Singh, "I have come to paint." On this, his friend quipped, "Then go and paint".

By then, Sobha Singh was confident that he was born to paint and that he had talent in painting. The remark of his friend put the final seal on his decision to adopt the art as his avocation. The idea of leaving the job and this place, and of settling down as an artist became more firm. The inspection rounds and office work with which he was so contented earlier, started boring him. He was impatient to leave for home and start a family.

He left Margel after staying here for one-and-a-half years. At the time of his departure, as a good omen, his head clerk gave him - *khichri* - salted rice gruel, with curds to eat.

After serving at Basra and Baghdad for a total of three and a half years, Sobha Singh was returning to India towards the end of 1922. He was fully-grown, mature and healthy, and was musing over his entering into the domain of the artists. On his way back on the ship, he would come out on the deck and get lost into the expanse of the horizon.

### **Return Home**

Sobha Singh reached Amritsar with Rs.1500/- which he had saved during his stay in Baghdad. He calculated that rupees 4000, will suffice for his marriage. He had been regularly sending money to his sister Lachhmi, and hoped that she might also have saved for him some out of that. However, instead of giving him something, she asked for more money to clear her debts. The eagerness and joy of coming back home was all gone. In frustration, he thought of renouncing the world and live the solitary life of an ascetic in the forests.

There was a colony of sweepers on the bank of the drain called Hansali, on the outskirts of Amritsar. It was called Bhutanpura (Town of Ghosts). There was a dilapidated tomb under a huge banyan tree. The tree was an abode of vultures at night, and these big birds kept restless and shrieking in the dark. An attendant lived in the tomb, and an earthen oil lamp was kept burning there. Before leaving for the forest, Sobha Singh wanted to test his courage by going up to that tomb at night. He had hardly ventured there when, unsuspectingly, his eyes fell on a human like shadow in the fluttering pale light of the lamp. A shivering sensation ran along his spine and he got scared. Just at the same time a vulture fluttered its big wings and other vultures followed suit accompanied by hellish shrieks. Sobha Singh, a young and robust man of twenty-two, lost his wits. Terrified, he took to his heels. His clothes got caught in a thorny bush. He fell down and presumed that a ghost had overpowered him. He became cold and nearly fainted. All his energy was drained out. With great efforts, he could climb up the raised bank of the dismantled culvert of the drain by crawling and moving by sitting on his feet. He could not stand up and walk. This removed from his mind all thoughts of ever leading a monastic life away in jungles.

## **Marriage**

Sobha Singh tried to adjust according to the circumstances. He married Pancham Kaur alias Panjo, renamed Inder Kaur after marriage. She was younger to him by twelve years. Her father Ram Singh was a typist and moneylender of Gurdaspur, and Pancham Kaur was the daughter of his second wife from her first marriage. The maternal grandparents of Pancham Kaur belonged to Trilokpur, beyond Pathankot on the way to Palampur. His marriage was performed at Lachhmi's house in Amritsar, but soon Sobha Singh had to move out along with his wife, because of Lachhmi's indignant behavior towards Inder Kaur. He left the house with only four annas (One quarter of a rupee) with him, and hired a room near Jallianwala Bagh, in the same town.

To Sobha Singh's good luck, the very next morning - even before the daybreak, Hira Singh Dardi, editor of *Phulwari*, knocked at their door. He wanted Sobha Singh to do some paintings for his paper and handed over an advance of Rs.20/-. Although it was a very meager amount considering the labor required, yet Sobha Singh considered it a God sent gift and accepted it. Thus began his career as a professional artist, and with tenacity and perseverance he rose to great heights with the passage of time.

Inder Kaur called Sobha Singh Dar ji, an abbreviation for Sardar ji – dear Sir. Later, everyone started calling him Dar ji, out of love and respect. Since Inder Kaur was too young, Sobha Singh taught her cooking, management of the house and the norms of the social life. Inder Kaur was fond of hot, spiced, foods, pickles and sweets. She took extraordinary care of the visiting friends and relatives, and was a good host.

Taking advantage of the innocence of Inder Kaur, Lachhmi sold off her gold ornaments and substituted them with those made of brass. When the mother of Inder Kaur showed the ornaments to a goldsmith, he told of the cheating. When she complained to Lachhmi, instead of expressing regrets, she asserted her claim on the ornaments of gold. Perhaps, she was trying to get the price of all sisterly affection and responsibility for bringing up her younger brother – Sobha Singh.

### III

## ARTIST IN THE FIELD

### Amritsar

Sobha Singh's residence was in the Chowk Phuwarewala, near Jallianwala Bagh, in Amritsar. The room was so small that on stretching his legs, his feet went out of the window. This place, also served as his studio, and he named it Subhash Studio. He had adopted the surname "Subhash." It was in this small, makeshift studio that he painted whatever anyone asked him for. To earn a livelihood was of prime importance. He designed the jackets of the books, although it earned him a very meager sum. He drew insets on the left out places on the lithographic paper, and on the average one inset brought him 6 to 7 rupees. He designed the cover of the inaugural issue of *Karrak*, a Ghadar-Movement journal. Financially, the art of painting was in a very bad shape those days. To begin with, an ordinary illustration fetched only four annas, or a quarter of a rupee. Whenever a fellow discouraged him saying that painting may not earn enough for him to make a decent living, he often gave the example of the man who once processed and sold *amritdhara* – essential oil drops, for one anna (1/16<sup>th</sup> of a rupee) per phial, outside Lahori Gate in Lahore, but died a millionaire. Once a fellow remarked, "What a job, you just earn four annas per picture." Irritated he snubbed him, "I don't sell chick-peas like your father." He believed in the dignity of labor.

Sobha Singh once narrated, "Under my room was the shop of a barber. He asked me to paint Hairdresser in place of Barber, on his board. I became a bit hesitant but then I asked him to push it up through the window of my room at 10 at night and to get that back at the same time through that very window the next night. I charged rupee one for the job. The artists were economically in real sad plight."

The disappointing prospect of painting, and a distressing situation at home due to the changed behavior of Lachhmi, caused much pain and anguish to Sobha Singh. He thought of writing to Ingles for a job in the Army, but a friend informed him that he had already died in an air crash when going home on leave. This hope was also gone. Sobha Singh's dream of a sweet home which he had woven was getting shattered. This used to make him sad.

It was around this time that two creative geniuses of the time – Sobha Singh and Nanak Singh, met together and with it

began a new phase in the life and career of Sobha Singh. Nanak Singh, the noted Punjabi novelist, started visiting Sobha Singh for getting the paintings done for his books. He too had faced problems in getting established as a writer, in his early career. One day, Nanak Singh came to him sad and disillusioned. He was seriously thinking of giving up writing as a because he found it hard to earn a living out of it. On hearing his tale of woe, the artist placed his brush beside his pen to symbolize the friendship of the two. "Till my brush is beside your pen and these both are pulsating with life, nothing can be a hurdle in the path of your progress," Sobha Singh remarked. This friendship helped Nanak Singh to cross the initial problems in his profession. Raj Kaur, Nanak Singh's wife, and Inder Kaur, also became good friends.

Giani Kartar Singh Hitkari, father of the celebrated Punjabi poetess and novelist Amrita Pritam, and editor of *Ranjit Nagara*, started getting paintings for their monthly magazines from Sobha Singh. Hitkari, gradually became a family friend of Sobha Singh and remained so throughout his life. A relative of Hitkari borrowed many paintings for an exhibition and took these to Shekhupura, but these were never returned.

### **Evolving Mind**

There was an interesting episode which proved to be a turning point in Sobha Singh's life and inspired him to put on canvas the heritage of the Sikhs. These were the days of non-cooperation movement spearheaded by patriotic Indians with a view to secure independence for their motherland. It was lead by Saifudin Kitchlu. The Akali Dall, which was and still is the premier political party of the Sikhs, was fully involved in it. The *jathas* – bands, of about 500 Akali workers left daily after saying their *ardas* – invocation, and vow to remain non-violent, to court arrest. They raised slogans for the freedom of the country and sang *Shabads* – hymns, from *gurbani* – Sikh-Scriptures. Their devotion and self-surrender were remarkable. The police would generally receive such *jathas* with a baton charge to it. The Sikhs kept on chanting *Waheguru, Waheguru* (Lord, my God!). The injured, after treatment and getting well, joined the protest marches again, though fully aware of the fate awaiting them. They were fearless of what the police would do. They had great courage, determination and self-control. They did not give up their peaceful protest until the oppressive British Government

yielded to their just demands. They had an unwavering faith in their Guru Prophet.

Sobha Singh, daily watched this scene from his studio and he realized that all the heroic deeds narrated in the Sikh history were true. He saw that the Sikhs going in the procession lead by *Panj Pyaras* (Five beloved of the Guru), after offering their *ardas*, were deeply immersed in the love of their Guru, and kept on uttering *Waheguru, Waheguru*, even when they fell down almost unconscious on getting a severe beating. They knew that they could die, but they never turned their backs once they joined the *jatha*. Their self-surrender was supreme!

Then happened the tragic event of Panja Sahib (Hasan Abdal), now in Pakistan. A train carrying the freedom fighters as prisoners, was ordered not to stop at the railway station. The Sikhs wanted the train to stop so that they could feed their hungry brethren. They said *ardas* – Invocation, vowed to stop the train, and reached the railway station. On learning that the train will not stop there, they lay down on the tracks without any fear of death so that they could fulfill their resolve. Some of them got crushed under the coming train, but were able to force the train to stop and feed the hungry passengers. The deputy commissioner questioned a person, “Why do you do it?” He replied, “Ask the *Jathedar* – Leader.” So deep was their faith, and so unwavering their commitment to the Guru!

Sobha Singh went to Victoria Jubilee Hospital, Amritsar, to see the injured. He saw Kitchlu sitting beside an old man, on his bed. Sobha Singh bowed to the old Sikh with a glowing, calm face, but he took his hands and placed them in the lap of Kitchlu and said, “Bow here, son!” The new realities of life deeply influenced the mind of the artist.

Alongside the independence movement, the Gurdwara Reform movement was also going on. The Sikhs had launched a peaceful agitation to liberate their historical shrines from the hands of corrupt custodians, called Mahants. In this struggle, the British Government in India provided help and protection to these Mahants against the agitating Sikhs. The Sikhs took out peaceful marches and were promptly arrested. The atrocities were perpetrated on them and they were tortured. They received injuries at the hands of police and Mahants. Many died in the struggle, but they never gave up humility and non-violence.

Those days, a white hawk visited the Golden Temple Amritsar, everyday, flew around it five times, took *amrit* at Har-Ki-Pauri (drank at the holy tank) and flew away. Sikhs believed

it to be the holy bird of Guru Gobind Singh. They took its visitations as an assurance of the protection by the Guru in the cause of their struggle. On seeing it, Sikhs shouted the slogans of victory. The hawk stopped visiting when the atrocities of the government on the Sikhs stopped. The movement eventually succeeded in wresting control of *gurdwaras* (Sikh temple) from corrupt Mahants.

Sobha Singh contemplated seriously on these incidents. He had so far been painting for those who did not value the spirit of art. "Here are those who have the beauty of the art in them. This enabled them to repose their faith in their Guru," the artist thought. He contemplated, "They saw their Guru in their minds through their creative imagination. Why not help them by placing their Guru before them in the paintings?" This also inspired him to paint the half-forgotten pages of the Sikh history.

Some time after opening his studio near Jallianwala Bagh and after attaining somewhat financial security, Sobha Singh started searching for a better place to work. He moved his studio in quick succession to Gali Kamboan, Chowk Bijliwala, Katra Ghanyan, backside of Santokhsar, Partap Bazar and Bazar Mai Sewan, in Amritsar. His studio appeared to be on a run. Dhani Ram Chatrik, a well-known Punjabi poet, remarked jokingly, "Your shop runs well!" Sobha Singh was in the full bloom of his youth, and had a lot of energy, besides of course great aspirations and high hopes. He saw little prospect of progress at Amritsar which was mainly a trade center for cloth in north India. The cultural activities were very limited. Only a very few people could appreciate the art. He needed a place where his talent could flourish. He wanted satisfaction of the art in him, as well as financial security.

### **To Lahore**

After weighing the prospects, Sobha Singh shifted to Lahore in 1926, and set up his studio, "The Echo School of Art," adjoining the railway station, near Dalgran Mosque on Brandreth Road. Shortly afterwards he shifted to Anarkali Bazar. Lahore was the capital of undivided Punjab. There were Government offices, a University, many colleges and schools, with a lot of social and cultural activity. Well-established publishing houses and quality printing presses were there. It was a far bigger place than Amritsar, and was a better and wider market for the work of art. In a very short time Sobha Singh became popular. His paintings were in good demand and he got established as an

artist very soon. He did not forget Amritsar and occasionally visited his friends and relatives there.

Sobha Singh had great love for mountains and used to make occasional excursions within about one hundred miles of Amritsar. He frequently visited Pathankot, Shahpur-Kandi, Dalhousie, Dharamsala, Trilokpur, etc. He carried one blanket with him and always traveled light. Nanak Singh would accompany him quite often. Later, Kartar Singh Hitkari also joined the duo.

Nanak Singh asked, "How do you take a hardship, especially a financial one?" Sobha Singh replied, "When a man can laugh at his problems, then he is sure that the misery is not his lot." As usual, he kept cracking jokes and snapping witty remarks even in bad days. They were coming down the green, winding hill road leisurely. It was a pleasant, cool morning. Nanak Singh started reciting Guru Nanak's *Japu ji Sahib* - the morning prayer. Sobha Singh felt spellbound. On such trips he did not bother for his personal convenience and his object was to draw joy out of the nature.

Sobha Singh was on his way to Shahpur-Kandi which is situated on the bank of river Ravi, near Pathankot. He was riding the horse led by the hill-man. Passing through the zigzag bridle path the horseman constantly kept telling the tales of snakes infesting the area. Suddenly, a brown cobra appeared from nowhere and attacked Sobha Singh. He reflexly jerked his dangling foot aside and its fangs missed the target. Hit by the horse-hoof the dazed cobra hurried away towards bushes.

He reached Shahpur-Kandi very late in the evening. It was hard to find a place to pass the night at that odd hour in that small village. He saw a Hindu temple and knocked at its door. The wife of the priest welcomed him with a smile and offered him a bed to rest. She gave him a glass of water and got busy to prepare food for him. The priest came from outside after some time and served him hot food, smilingly. A beautiful small daughter of the priest also helped in taking care of the guest. He was impressed by the love and care extended to the stranger. Next morning when leaving, Sobha Singh out of his gratitude gave them some money which they accepted after much persuasion. The priest, his wife and their daughter came out to see him off. This experience became a part of his memory.

In those days, Mohinder Singh Randhawa was studying for his M.Sc. in Botany, in the Government College at Lahore.



He visited the artist often and got the drawings of his practicals made by him. Later on he entered the ICS service and was the Deputy Commissioner in Delhi at the time of partition of India in 1947. He held high positions in the government including that of the Vice-Chairman of Agricultural Commission, Chief Commissioner of Union Territory Chandigarh, and vice-chancellor of Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana.

When at Lahore, in 1928, Sobha Singh heard of a saint visiting Harimandir Sahib -Golden Temple, Amritsar, and staying close to Nishan Sahib – the Sikh Flag. Dar ji went to see him. The saint narrated, "In the hard time for Sikhs, a Sikh on a mission visited my forefathers. He talked about Sikhs, their Gurus, history and the crusade. Finally he advised that when you feel purified enough not to get a bad thought even in dream, go to Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) and take Amrit – the Holy Drink to get inducted into the Sikh faith. Since then, descendants of my family have been visiting Harimandir Sahib - Golden Temple, Amritsar, but they feel that they are not even yet pure enough to take Amrit." Dar ji became aware that not the conventions and the rituals, but the principles of Sikhism were what mattered.

According to Dar ji, a real and meaningful life, full of virtues is the real meaning of religion. Guru Gobind Singh set aside the request of Bhai Nand Lal to take Amrit. He lived a life of virtue and did not need any other discipline.

On the challenge by Maharaja Hira Singh of Nabha (Punjab), Bhai Narain Singh, father of well known Sikh scholar Bhai Kahn Sing, recited Guru Granth Sahib – Holy Book of Sikhs, in a single sitting of 48 hours. Maharaja sent Bhai Narain Singh home in a palanquin, and one of the palanquin bearers was Maharaja himself. From this story Dar ji realized the greatness of the Guru and Gurbani, and contemplated that by painting the Gurus, he will serve both the Gurus and their disciples.

Bhagat Singh, the great martyr, visited Sobha Singh who did not recognize him at that time. He had become clean-shaven. He offered him tea. Bhagat Singh left his camera with him. He might have thought that an artist would keep that with more care. Bhagat Singh was arrested shortly afterwards. Ranbir, the editor of *Milap*, was raising a fund to defend Bhagat Singh. Though himself short of money, Dar ji gave 20 rupees when Ranbir went to him for collection. Rupees twenty were a very big amount in those days, almost the pay of one month.

Later, he made an impressive and meaningful painting of Bhagat Singh. Dar ji had soft corner for the freedom fighters.

Sobha Singh continued to work at Lahore for about three years. During this period, his love for the high mountains grew with each passing day. One day he decided to shift his studio to a place which was nearer to the beauty of Nature. He shifted to the house of his in-laws at Trilokpur. However, he could not pull on well for long with his father-in-law who was fond of drinking and gambling whereas Sobha Singh was a teetotaler and very sensitive. He could hardly stay there for about two months and went back to Lahore. But, now his heart was not in Lahore.

### **Shifting to Delhi**

After spending about five years there, he ultimately shifted to Delhi in 1931, for greener pastures in the field of art.

The main reason for shifting from Lahore was the artist's realization that the city could no more contribute to his artistic growth and that there was better scope for artistic and material progress in Delhi. On reaching Delhi, Sobha Singh set up his studio in the Karol Bagh area at Baratuti. He was averse to the rush and the noise at the place and hardly six months had passed when he left here for Kangra Valley in 1932. His wife did not approve of it, as there could not be any prospect in the mountains. His friends too, thought that his going to the hills was no less than insanity, as he was doing very well in Delhi.

Sobha Singh went to his brother-in-law at Trilokpur where the latter was working as keeper-cum-priest of a Gurdwara (Sikh temple). Every now and then he offered some money to the holy book there. This money would, of course, go to the Keeper. This way, he wanted to indirectly compensate for his staying there. Occasionally, he gave money to his children, too. However, after some time his brother-in-law made him an indirect suggestion to leave. This hurt the artist very much. He was full of remorse and pain, brooding why everyone took him to be an eccentric. Sitting dejected on a stone in the creek with his feet dangling in the water, he collapsed on the stone with grief. He contemplated on the life of Guru Gobind Singh who sacrificed his everything for the right cause. A divine light passed through his whole being. He picked up courage and got up a new and transformed man. He packed up and left for Mandi Saket to find a place where he could finally settle down on his own. The Raja of Mandi was a great lover of art, but to his

disappointment the Raja was away to England. After staying at Mandi for some time, he went to Amritsar to get brushes and paints etc. There, he contracted typhoid and was confined to bed for one and a half months. He stayed with his friend Nanak Singh. On getting well, he went back to Delhi.

Sobha Singh came to Delhi in the prime of his life and as an artist of repute. There, after shifting his studio a few times, he finally settled down in Cannaught Place. At that time, it was a quiet place and close by were scenic hillocks covered with green forests. He stayed in Delhi for twelve years, up to 1942. All through, his studio and the residence were at the same place, except from 1939 to 1941, when he lived at Karol Bagh and his studio was at Cannaught Place. During his stay in Delhi, Sobha Singh earned a great fame as an artist. Sardar Ukil, with his distinct style of painting, was the only other painter there at that time.

To start with, Sobha Singh had a hard time to settle in Delhi. He had with him Mangal, his sincere servant. He wanted Dar ji to get him a job in the "Punjabi Press" which was known for its quality printing. Mangal wanted to help his master with his earning but he declined the offer politely. The artist always valued his loyalty and spirit of sacrifice. Sobha Singh worked for some time with Soni and Co, to earn his living even though the work was not creative.

Ram Lal Lakhi, an old friend of Sobha Singh took him to Colonel G.T. Tait, the Chief Publicity Officer in the Railway Board at Delhi. He gave publicity work to the artist. The poster created by him was highly praised. The Colonel became his friend. Sitting before a fireplace, they would discuss the human values and spirituality. Dar ji loved literature. Besides publicity work, Dar ji made portraits also. Colonel asked for sensual paintings for his friend, but Dar ji flatly refused, and his principles impressed Mr. Tait.

Amar Singh stayed in Delhi with Sobha Singh for four years as his disciple. He was very sincere, obedient, honest and hard working. The wife of Sobha Singh loved him like her own son. Sometime, when strolling with Amar Singh they would try to laugh away the painful episodes of their lives. Sobha Singh never painted misery as it was already in plenty in human life, rather he preferred to paint beauty and joy. He appreciated the company of friends, good people etc. and advocated, "Though greatness becomes weakness, never give up getting together however great you may become."

To speak to Colonel Tait on phone, he told the clerk, "I want to meet Colonel Tait." The clerk said, "Say, I want to speak to Colonel". Sobha Singh became very upset. In the evening he went to the clerk, and disclosed it to him. The clerk was surprised, but it restored the peace of mind of the artist.

The love for mountains did not get less even though he was very busy in Delhi. Nanak Singh, Kartar Singh Hitkari and his other friends from Amritsar and Lahore, occasionally came to him in Delhi, and together they used to slip away to one or the other hill station e.g. Kullu, Manali etc. Sobha Singh was always in search of a suitable place in the hills to settle down permanently.

Hazrat Josh Malihabadi lived in Karol Bagh, and would visit him occasionally. Gurbaksh Singh, editor of a Punjabi monthly *Prit Lari*, met him in 1935, but the latter was not much impressed with him at that time though they became good friends afterwards. Gurbaksh Singh's views on Sikhism, particularly expressed in his book titled *Param Manukh*, (Man the Supreme) did not please the Sikh masses. His another book of short stories *Annviahi Maan* (Unmarried Mother), earned him a violent criticism from public in general. Sobha Singh wrote to him, "I am pained that people start opposing even the truth." This encouraged Gurbaksh Singh and he visited him at Delhi a couple of times.

Gurbaksh Singh was an engineer by profession working with the railway and he was posted at Naushehra in northwestern Frontier Province of Punjab, before the partition of India. He had imbibed communist views. He resigned his job with the railway and started farming to earn his livelihood. Later, he shifted to Model Town, Lahore, and developed a township named Prit Nagar, close to Amritsar.

Sobha Singh used to become silent when he was busy with the brush, and absorbed in painting. In Delhi he produced his prominent paintings Sohni Mahiwal, Shahjahan and Mumtaz, Lala Rukh, Parbhat, The Dawn, Noorjahan in the court of Guru Hargobind, and some others. His paintings were published in various journals at home and abroad. Of these Sohni-Mahiwal took him to great artistic heights. It remains one of his greatest creations even to this day.

Sobha Singh became a social celebrity, though he tried to withdraw himself from public as much as possible. Col. Tait wondered as to how could an eminent artist like Sobha Singh be vegetarian and teetotaler? Towards the later period of his stay

in Delhi, an aura of a renowned artist started gathering around Sobha Singh's personality. He was fair colored, tall and healthy young man in his thirties. He had a towering personality. Always smiling, he was a man of discipline and self-control. He believed that an artist lived by the higher values of life and needed no outside intoxicant to inspire his creativity. He adhered to the ethics and nobility of the profession, and represented the higher principles of life.

Sobha Singh valued the effect of company. Once, he had visited Gurdwara of Shaheed Deep Singh (Sikh temple of martyr Deep Singh). He was disappointed to see a man appealing in loud voice to donate for the construction of domes of Gurdwara. He thought, such appeals for funds should be posted, unhealthy noise (vibrations) adversely affected the devotees. He recalled an event when an evil influence produced unhealthy vibrations. Mahatma Hans Raj, the founder Principal of DAV College at Lahore, once noted that a student of his college was getting weak day by day. He investigated and found that the room in the Anarkali, where the boy stayed, was occupied by a prostitute, before him. On changing his lodging the condition of the boy started improving. The bad vibrations in the room due to the prostitute having once lived there, kept the mind of the boy occupied with undesirable thoughts resulting in his failing health. He regained his normal self by getting out of the influence of the evil vibrations. It showed the effect of association. This incident left a deep imprint on the mind of Sobha Singh.

An officer of the Maharaja of Faridkot came to place an order for many "Bed-Room Paintings" for the Maharaja. Although the amount involved was tempting, yet Sobha Singh took no time to say a point blank no to the request. To him, home was a place of worship and nothing should be done to create obscene and unhealthy vibrations there.

Sobha Singh painted to elevate the human values. Whatever he painted, he gave it away to those who desired to have it, and never kept any record of the numbers and whereabouts of his paintings. He painted for the people and it was up to them to preserve them for the posterity. He lived for art and left the task of its preservation to the people.

Sobha Singh was compassionate by nature. His sister could not support her son. He simply forgot her own behavior towards him and his wife a few years back, and took it on him to

educate, train and get the boy married. He helped others unmindful of his own hardships.

### **Exhibitions at Simla**

The Fine Art Society of Simla used to hold an exhibition every year in the month of September. It requested Sobha Singh to bring the paintings for exhibition, but Sobha Singh believed that the sincerity and the honesty of purpose was all that mattered in one's vocation, and merely publicizing one's work did not add any value to it. However, on persistent request by the Society, he agreed and attended the exhibition first time in 1933. After that, he went there every year till 1942, the year this Society stopped functioning. The army officers which formed a major part of its management, were called to Burma and to other places in the World War II.

Sobha Singh worked day and night to complete a painting for the exhibition at Simla. To safeguard against theft during journey, he tied his paintings to the seat of the train-compartment. He was nearly always late in reaching the exhibition hall. His contribution was so much valued that the secretary of the society would generally order the entries closed only after he arrived. Arranging the paintings and the setting up of the exhibition usually took about a week. The exhibition, thereafter, lasted for a fortnight. Some of his paintings were sold there. He won the top prizes quite often.

One who acquires the name and fame, his family generally suffers on this count. One cannot pay as much attention to the family responsibilities as one should. Sobha Singh also got so engrossed in his paintings that he could not get time for his wife and household duties. They had not got a child after all these years of their marriage, and did not intend to adopt one. Sobha Singh kept himself busy painting. He thought little about anything else. This left his wife Inder Kaur lonely. Consequently, she became irritated, depressed and frustrated. Her only pastime was to entertain the guests. She herself had no control over her eating habits. She grew quite fat and became diabetic, with hypertension. Even then, she did not care for the advice of the physicians to control eating. Bad health made her very sensitive and intolerant even to minor incidents. Sobha Singh had the virtue of patience and perseverance. He tolerated everything and was otherwise quite considerate towards her. He understood her problem but was helpless. She

became impulsive, but still cared for their relatives, friends, and carefully preserved her cordial relations with others.

### **Unhappy Mind**

Inder Kaur was in depression, Her sister was pregnant. She and her mother came to her for delivery. Her mother went back after delivery. Sobha Singh wanted his wife to give some money to her mother when she was leaving, but there was no response. Sobha Singh became annoyed and left for his studio without taking food. Frustrated Inder Kaur took poison to commit suicide, but the timely medical aid saved her. He took this incident to heart and remained perturbed for quite a long time. His feeling was that he was no more a loved and respected "Dar ji," but an ordinary Sobha Singh whose wife tried to end her life. This was the last day of his good health!

Sobha Singh found a substantial amount of money missing from his house. His sister-in-law was the only person from outside who happened to be in the house, but he could not openly blame her. He did not mind the monetary loss, but this unlikely incident had a cumulative effect on his already perturbed mind.

One day, his necktie-pin fell down. When picking it up, he happened to see his face in the mirror of the chest. He did not recognize his own face. Overwhelming shock from this, generated thoughts of suicide. With great effort he retrieved the presence of his mind, "If none else, at least this fellow in the mirror is my friend." He reasoned out, "If everyone has to die one day even otherwise, then why not live for an aim – the aim of painting the Gurus!"

No doubt, he tried to come out of this mental state, but he became neurasthenic. Akhtar Husain Rampuri, a Hindi writer, was his friend. He took him to a psychiatrist at Fatehpuri in Delhi. The doctor told him, "You seem to have been deprived of love. This has unhinged you. Find some understanding woman." He retorted, "When I am not my own friend, then who else can be?" Sobha Singh was not ready to find love from someone other than his wife. The doctor also suggested that he should have an escape from this depression by going somewhere out of Delhi. Before visiting his friend Giani Kartar Singh Hitkari, Sobha Singh wrote to him, "Due to very sensitive state of his mind, even a word could be a sword to me." He cautioned him to be careful, but his friend misunderstood him, felt offended, and

was not at home when Sobha Singh reached his house at Dalhousie.

It was also the time when most of his friends and admirers in Delhi went away. Col. Tait had been called back to the army in 1942. Many office bearers of the Simla Fine Art Society had also gone to the war front. Was it not an irony of fate that the lovers of art had to go to war! Delhi being the likely target of air raids was also deserted by all those who could shift to the safer places. The city became desolate. Sobha Singh felt lonely.

He felt very disheartened especially when Col. Tait left. The parting words of the Colonel were, "We both are sensitive. I will not stand the tears in your eyes. Please don't come to the railway station to see us off. I will give your regards to Mrs. Tait." Sobha Singh presented him his painting "Shahjahan and Mumtaz," with a heavy heart. The Colonel shook his hands with deep emotion and left the room hurriedly. Tait was injured in the war and remained a prisoner of war in a Burma Camp from where he was sent back to Scotland. The two friends never met again!



## IV RAMBLINGS

Gurbaksh Singh of *Preet Lari* fame left the railway engineering service and established himself as a writer. He edited *Preet Lari*, a monthly Punjabi magazine, which he had started in 1933, and wrote a number of books propagating the socialistic ideas which were becoming popular.

### **Preetnagar**

He thought of setting up a township - Preet Nagar. He promoted the ideas through *Preet Lari*. In 1934-35, he held the Preet Conference and got a final approval for setting up the Preet Nagar. He selected the land falling within the limits of Lopoke village near Amritsar, and the township was built in 1939. Sobha Singh wrote to Gurbaksh Singh, "The man has hunger for love and he wants to stay with affectionate people. This venture of yours is a valuable and laudable step to fulfill this need."

Preet Nagar had a modern set up with broad roads and well-spaced buildings. It had "Activity School," a common mess, an open-air theater with a big stage, and a playground. It was run on the community basis, self-help, and selfless service. In the job-oriented education system, the young boys and girls here mixed freely and worked together.

Nanak Singh, who by now had attained the status of a first rank novelist in Punjabi, had settled there along with other friends. They asked Sobha Singh also to shift to the place. He came down to Preet Nagar in 1942. The environment was pleasant. The working conditions were ideal. He liked the place. Preet Nagar was bubbling with life and activity.

Sobha Singh rented a big bungalow on the outskirts of Preet Nagar at Rupees seven per month. He accepted teaching assignment in art, there. He had many good students like Minder, Dhanwant, Omi, etc. Minder kept learning the painting for quite a long time. Parkash, a teacher in Activity School, lived in his neighborhood. She was a keen reader of books and often engaged in discussions with Sobha Singh. He admired her aptitude for learning. Free mixing of boys and girls in those days of orthodoxy created some problems and misgivings among the common people. Sobha Singh would solve such issues and other problems, with affection and understanding.

He became popular in a short time. Everyone in Preet Nagar loved and respected him.

The place was surrounded by agricultural fields. There was no noise and pollution of the traffic as in cities. Sobha Singh's studio in his bungalow was quite spacious. He enjoyed his work. His students came to him in small groups. The artist liked the company of these energetic young people. He started receiving visitors everyday, who were interested in art and painting. They complimented Gurbaksh Singh for bringing such a great and noble man to Preet Nagar. The artist became a center of attraction for the people.

In 1944, Preet Nagar hosted a Preet Conference. The paintings by Sobha Singh exhibited on the occasion attracted visitors the most. When questioned about his success, he replied, "When a painting is seen, an impression is taken and opinion is made there and then. After all, how much time it will take? A book should be read for making a conclusion and this takes time and demands an effort on the part of the reader." The people congratulated the organizers. Dr. M.S. Randhawa, a long-time admirer of the artist and a senior government officer, invited him for an exhibition at Simla.

Sobha Singh was told one day that a girl named Jaswant Kaur desired to see his paintings, but she could not do so due to her ill health. He kept silent at that time but the next day he sent his selected paintings to her home. Later, when he went to Simla, on Randhawa's suggestion, this ailing girl was shifted to him. With love and care, he restored her lost confidence and within one year she went back home a healthy girl. After partition, she stayed for five months at Andretta with the artist's family and prepared for her M.B.B.S. examination. Due to lack of a child, Sobha Singh and his wife were depressed. One day, Jaswant Kaur asked, "What have you painted Dar ji?" He replied, "Nothing and for whom?" She quipped, "For me!" The innocent remarks brightened up both of them.

Sobha Singh found to his dismay that whatever he did or said at Preet Nagar, reached Gurbaksh Singh. This was distorted and exaggerated by some members of the Preet Sena, a volunteer organization there. Sobha Singh was outspoken, and would speak out without restraint. To him, the truth was great irrespective of the fact whether it hurts anybody or not. Disillusionment with Preet Nagar, once again awakened the

desire in Sobha Singh to find a peaceful place for him to settle in the mountains.

### **Norah Richards Met**

In 1942, while traveling' he happened to meet Norah Richards, "mother" of the Punjabi drama. She lived at Andretta, and asked Sobha Singh to settle down there. Late in 1942, he visited Andretta with Gurbaksh Singh and a group of the Activity School children. Sobha Singh was impressed by the small village which was about 8 miles from Palampur, in the Himachal Pradesh.

Sobha Singh and Gurbaksh Singh went to meet Norah Richards, but she was not there. Sobha Singh wrote to her and told that he liked this place for him to settle down. She advised, "This is not the way to purchase a land to build a house. You should come and stay here for a while so that you and the people here observe each other. Experience the summer and the winter here. If you like the place, then purchase the land if someone is willing to sell."

The artist received a request from the Army Publicity Office and without a second thought he joined its Advertisement Department at Simla on 1st May 1945. Four days later, came the fall of Hitler. The department wanted to send Sobha Singh to Pune, but he declined to go. Mercenary consideration failed to tempt him away from the beauty of nature.

In late 1946, Sobha Singh took up the art-direction of a movie named *Butt-Traash* (The sculptor). "Khan Sahib" was its proprietor. He had earned money from supplying horse shoe-nails to the army in the World War II. Art direction kept him busy for about nine months. Sobha Singh directed the hero to fall from a height in such a way as on touching the ground he should stand still like a statue. The hero dared not do that and the artist would not compromise.

Another scene in the film demanded the presence of some prostitutes. According to the script, in the scene, the sculptor was to say on seeing those women, "Why have you brought these whores for modeling?" Sobha Singh objected to this crude dialogue. The director did not agree with him and remained adamant. On hearing that sentence, the women became furious and left the scene abusing. Khan Sahib felt concerned and wanted to talk to Sobha Singh urgently on this issue, but it was artist's nap time and his secretary did not

disturb him. It annoyed Khan. When Sobha Singh came to know of it, he threw a pack of currency notes on his table and said, "It is my right to take a nap and don't think I attained all this simply by sleeping. Take away all the money you gave me till today." Khan tried his best to sign up Sobha Singh for his next film too, but he refused. He hated the environment in which the filmmaker worked. People around there had nothing to do except indulging in vulgar gossip, smoking, drinking, spitting the chewed beetle leaves, and taking strong tea all the day long. They looked a crazy lot. This sort of environment was not to the liking of the artist who loved beauty as intensely as he abhorred vulgarity.

Sobha Singh had already visited Andretta in 1942. In 1946, he went there again and made arrangement to shift his household effects. When coming down, shortly after passing Pathankot, his bus hit the parapet of a road bridge. His already injured left leg was hurt again. Sardar Inder Singh who was married at Gurdaspur, and Mr. Mehta of Mehta Halftone Press, were also traveling with him. Dar ji felt pain when passing urine and thought there was blood in it. Inder Singh took urine in his cupped hands and assured him that it was clear. Mr. Mehta escorted him to the residence of Jaswant Gill, at Nisbat Road, Lahore. It would have been a problem to lift him to his apartment in Anarkali, which was on the first floor, near Mehta Halftone Press. Jaswant Gill was the same girl who was an old family friend of Dar ji. A surgeon from the King Edward Medical College, Lahore, treated him. He returned to his apartment after two weeks though he still had to be carried upstairs in a chair.

As soon as Sobha Singh had recovered from the injury, he made plans to go to a hill station for recuperation. He left Lahore on 1 January 1947 and reached Manali. He rested and relaxed there for some time and came back to Lahore resolved that he will soon shift to Andretta. He packed up and planned to leave Lahore on the first day of March 1947.

Sobha Singh had ordered some paints and brushes. The supplier needed one week. On 3 March 1947, the Hindu-Muslim riots broke out all over India after its partition. Some crates of his paintings and luggage were sent to the house of Jaswant Gill who with Mr. Mehta took on themselves to send all this to India with their own luggage.

### **1947 Riots**

At Lahore, Dar ji lived in Krishna Nagar in Gowal Mandi area at that time. This was a Hindu dominated area. Close by was Mochi-Gate, which was mostly a Muslim locality. The Muslims beat up a 55 year-old Hindu who saved his life by running away and hiding under a road-culvert. The Hindus went there in a mob and rescued him. This sparked the first Hindu-Muslim riots in Lahore.

The members of the Muslim-League were given a staff and a helmet each and they could eat free from any Muslim Hotel. The riots started in the part of the place where Dar ji lived.

For twenty-five days he witnessed arson, looting and killing. The areas of Rang Mahal, Lahori Gate and Shahalmi Gate were the worst affected. A rumor spread that a Muslim doctor and medical students poisoned the injured Hindus who went to the Medical College Hospital for treatment. Thereafter, Hindus stopped going to the Muslim doctors.

When it became comparatively calm and safe, Dar ji left Lahore with only one bedroll and a suitcase. His disciple Jai Gopal Sharma and Jai Gopal's parents escorted him with drawn swords to the railway station, traveling in a tonga (Horse drawn cart). Jai Gopal accompanied him to Andretta. Inder Kaur - Mrs. Sobha Singh, was sent to the Mehta family at Delhi.

### **Moving To Andretta**

The artist and Jai Gopal Sharma, left the narrow-gauge train at its terminal station Baij Nath, reached Bhuarna by bus, and from there to Andretta by ponies.

Sobha Singh and Jai Gopal Sharma reached Andretta on the evening of 29th March 1947. They were welcomed by a fine drizzle. The innocent and simple people of the hills were terrified at the reports of riots all around and were apprehensive of any unknown person entering their villages. They feared that an unknown man might not spark off riots in their peaceful places. The shopkeepers at Andretta were suspicious of the newcomers and they did not like them to stay in their village. However, the *Sarpanch* (Headman) gave in to their determination and allowed them into a room with its door missing. Here, the shopkeeper used to dry tealeaves. By the next morning, Dar ji caught cough and fever due to exposure. Jai Gopal went to Palampur the next day and brought medicine

for his master. They rented a house next day. Jai Gopal was a good help and stayed with the artist for some time.

Sobha Singh had well established himself as an artist at Delhi and had good patronage, but he could not adjust to the noise, pollution and the rush of life there. He wanted the place of his liking to settle down and not keep moving from place to place all his life. He desired a very lovely and calm place, and found Andretta very much to his liking. It was a place of his dreams, although he had to exert much to adjust with nature. Sobha Singh would remark, "We have to deal less with the fantasies of our desires, but more with the moods of the nature, at such a place. Here, if I break the twig of a bush, nobody will come and reprimand me. Birds come on their own, sing and fly away. Here, I get pleasure out of it. The sun rises and sets. The clouds come and float away. I do whatever I wish to, and I do not bother for the rest. I try to make my imaginative world a workable one."

Next day, Sobha Singh went to Nohra Richard and sent in a note, "Sobha Singh, fine art painter-artist." She came out saying, "Who Sobha Singh? The word artist is not yet defined." He got up to leave. She retorted, "Oh, why do you go?" The artist said, "I presume I am not welcome here." She said, "I am sorry." But saying, "Not now. May be I come later," he left.

Gurcharan Singh of Blue Art Pottery, had his house at Andretta. Nohra Richards was its caretaker. Sobha Singh asked for renting it. Nohra Richards said, "Rent is fifteen rupees per month. You are an artist, so I will charge you half of it. Quick at wits, Sobha Singh jokingly remarked, "The rent is seven and a half rupees. I am an artist, and so I will pay rupees fifteen per month." When Gurcharan Singh visited the village, he treated the artist as his guest, and he stayed there for nine months.

Within six months of his arrival at Andretta, Sobha Singh purchased four Kanals of land from a needy farmer. He needed money for the marriage of his daughter. He charged a high price of rupees 275 per *Kanal* (220 square yards. About \$ 40 per Kanal, at that time). However, the farmer started bothering him by not transferring the lot in his name. By chance, a *Tehsildar* (Revenue officer) friend of his was posted there and through him he got the legal deed executed. Later, the farmer became a friend of Sobha Singh and sold to him more land facing the previous plot, across the road. Mrs. Sobha Singh was still in Delhi and the Mehtas did not want Inder Kaur to go to Andretta. The Mehtas had moved their Printing Press

and other belongings from Lahore to Delhi, but Sobha Singh's luggage did not come with theirs. Jaswant Kaur Gill went to Andretta with Piara Singh Data. His luggage was not with them as well. Sobha Singh tried in vain two or three times to retrieve his paintings from Lahore, if nothing else. It was presumed that his paintings were looted or burnt down during those communal riots. Sobha Singh visited Delhi on 20th December 1947 to meet his wife and the Mehta family.

### **Village of Andretta**

The village Andretta which Sobha Singh made his permanent dwelling is situated about thirteen kilometers from Palampur. Palampur is about one hundred kilometers from Pathankot, on the Kullu-Manali road. Pathankot is the gateway to the Dhauladhar range of the Himalayas. From here the roads go to Jammu & Cashmere, Kullu-Manali and to Dalhousie. The roads to Dharamshala and Chamba, also branch off from these roads. From here, the train tract ends up at Jammu, and another narrow gauge railway line goes up to Joginder Nagar in the Kangra Valley of the Himachal Pradesh.

Palampur is on the railway map, but the town is a couple of kilometers away from the railway station, at the village Maranda. Beyond this towards Kullu, is the railway station of Panchrukhi, and a kilometer or so from here is Andretta by road. A few kilometers from Palampur the Kullu-Manali road gives a branch on right called Chadiar Road. This wavy road with tea gardens on its sides, passes through Panch Rukhi and Andretta.

Andretta is a very small village, The buses from Palampur to Chadiar, pass through Andretta. When visiting Andretta, the rail and road pass through the beautiful Kangra valley. Throughout, the scenery is very charming. The town of Andretta is located on a beautiful sharp curve at the foot of the green hill on the southern side. On the north of the village is a mountain-brook teeming with trout, and beyond the green panorama of the hills and dales, is the towering snow-capped Dhauladhar range of the Himalayas.

The village becomes very cold in winter with occasional, sparse snowfall. In summer, it is pleasantly cool. At a short distance from the village are the homes of Norah Richards and of Gurcharan Singh. Near the home of Norah Richards is a rest house for the writers, now owned by the Punjabi University, Patiala. Earlier, it was under the supervision of Sobha Singh. Close to it is a fountain of the fresh water. The drinking water

was fetched from here for use in the household of Sobha Singh. Water from here was also taken, under the supervision of Sobha Singh, for Maharani Tara Devi, mother of Maharaja Karan Singh. Raja Sansar Chand also got his drinking water from this.

The home of Sobha Singh is situated on the north side of the village. It was the first house on the outskirts of the village towards Palampur, with late Mangat Ram's house coming next. A few kilometers from Andretta is the village of Agojar. Here, there is a small tank. The folklore has it that taking a bath in this tank bestows fertility even on barren women. Amrita Pritam wrote a poem about this village named "The Fairies of Gojar." Amrita Pritam brought Mrs. Sobha Singh and persuaded her to take bath in the tank, but fate had not willed her to become a mother.

The usual essential items of daily use are available at Panch Rukhi. The main town for shopping in this area is Palampur, and all the provisions are available there. There are hospitals, main post office, police station, rest house, hotels and quite a long and wide shopping lane. Close by is the army headquarters.

One day, coming from Panchrukhi, Dar ji asked his driver to stop the car on the steep road. He came out and pointing to the mountains exclaimed, "Wonderful, what an azure color of the sky, how charming!"

### **Short Visit to Delhi**

The visit of Sobha Singh to Delhi in December 1947. was with a double purpose - to bring Inder Kaur and also to do some paintings. He had left everything in Lahore during the Partition and was in need of money. In Delhi, he found his brother-in-law indifferent towards him. He was the same person whom he had once provided food and lodging for ten months. He decided to put up in an hotel. Labh Singh, his old friend, met him by chance and took him to his house. It was a small house in which he lived with his wife and daughter. Some alteration was made to set up his studio. They kept the artist with love and care. He stayed there for about two months and then went to Simla for one month. At Simla, he made a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi and won the first prize in the exhibition. It was also at Simla that he prepared a few posters for the Railways to earn some money. Rajinder Singh Bedi signed up Sobha Singh as an art-director to work at Bombay, but it remained unfulfilled. The film-industry environment was not to his liking.



Gurcharan Singh was a mutual friend of Sobha Singh and Dr. M.S. Randhawa, who was the Deputy Commissioner at Ambala, in 1948. Randhawa sent for the artist telegraphically, through Gurcharan Singh of the Blue Art Pottery. A painting of Guru Gobind Singh was urgently needed for the opening ceremony of Guru Gobind Singh Library at Ambala City. Dr. Randhawa himself was to perform that ceremony. On reaching Ambala, Sobha Singh felt annoyed to find sketchy arrangements for his stay. Dr. Randhawa, realizing his needs, put him with Gurcharan Singh. Sobha Singh stayed at Ambala for one month and made two paintings.

Randhawa was in charge of rehabilitation work as well. He was settling the refugees from Pakistan in Ambala district. In appreciation of his rehabilitation work, Sobha Singh made a beautiful bust of Randhawa in terra cotta. Gurcharan Singh had a pottery factory. He got this statue made in plaster. This statute was set on a wall of Dar ji's room at Andretta. Later, he made a portrait of Randhawa.

Randhawa got organized an exhibition of the paintings of Sobha Singh, at the Sirhind Club, Ambala. Afterwards, he sent him to Kasauli to relax and paint in the solitude of the hills. Later, Randhawa visited him, and stayed there for about a fortnight.

In 1949, returning from Kasauli, Sobha Singh wanted to take his wife to Andretta from Delhi, where she was sent when leaving Lahore. She was not keeping good health, but was reluctant to go to that lonely place where she would be surrounded by strangers only. Mother of Shiv Nath Mehta as well, did not want her to go. He had to put up for five days with Gurcharan Singh to persuade Inder Kaur to accompany him to Andretta.

## V THE ARTIST

### **Sobha Singh**

Anndretta is a small, sleepy village with just about five hundred people, in a remote corner of Himachal Pradesh. Due to the fame of the artist, the town came up on the tour-map of the very important persons too, from all over India and abroad. The military top brass, civilian officers, politicians, governors, chief ministers and ministers visited here. For many, a visit to Himachal was incomplete without calling on him at Andretta. This helped a lot in the improvement of the roads and the development of the village. Groups from educational, cultural and social institutions from different places frequently visited him.

The extension of the art gallery of Sobha Singh at Andretta became necessary with the addition of several new paintings. Sobha Singh desired that any person who visited, should see all of his paintings. To many he would suggest to visit his art gallery before sitting down to talk. He had a strong conviction that it was the work which made him famous, and thus Sobha Singh the man was secondary to the art-works he created. A visit to him was pointless unless these paintings were seen. Everyday, many local folks also visited the gallery. Once, standing before the painting of Sohni-Mahiwal, a hill woman remarked, "This is Dar ji's Sohni." He made her famous with his brush.

His advancing age and medical advice made rest necessary for him. He took nap in the afternoon religiously from 1 AM, to 4 PM. At night he went to sleep exactly at 9. He woke up at 3 in the morning, prepared his own cup of coffee and studied his favorite authors like Krishnamurthi, Emerson, Thoreou etc. or retouched his new or even old paintings. With the daybreak, he came out and sat down in the verandah facing the east and enjoyed the sunrise. The rest of the day was devoted to the easel and the visitors. The schedule of his afternoon rest had become his life-style and for the visitors also, it was imperative to respect it when going to meet him - "The wonderful man," Dr. Karam Singh Grewal of Amritsar, remarked once.

Sobha Singh was wit, wisdom and humility rolled in one. He replied every question with patience and elucidated it with

examples. His wisdom spellbound the visitors and they came back to him again and again. Once, he was questioned, "When did you become an artist?" He quipped, "Art comes with birth. It is like a genius who is born and not made. Something can be developed but it has to be there," and added, "When does a donkey become a donkey!"

At home, Sobha Singh kept his head uncovered, but would go out with his turban on. When at Preet Nagar, Gurbaksh Singh remarked, "Why do you put on turban when going out?" He replied, "Privacy at home is different from the social mixing outside. While going out, one must observe some norms." However, when his hair thinned out in his late fifties, he stopped tying the turban and kept his hair free flowing, brushed back. In 1957 Amrita Pritam accompanied him to McLeod-Ganj, eleven kilometers from Dharamsala - well known headquarters of the exiled Dalai Lama. He was with turban. Amrita Pritam remarked, "You looked fine otherwise. What have you done to yourself?" The artist took off his turban saying, "Then let it be so." Hardly he reached McLeod-Ganj when the hailstorm hit his naked head. He remarked, "Out of frying pan into fire." He never tied a turban again! If someone questioned him about it, he replied, "A man does not have to live by external symbols only." Sometimes he said, "If you have come to see my turban, it is there. If you have come to meet me, I am here before you." Though he was not an Amritdhari (Properly inducted into Sikh faith and had some liberty, he revered the Gurus – Prophets, and practically honored the principles of his faith. He advocated high ideals and real goodness. He himself was an ethical person and lived an elevated, saintly life. He was against cutting hair, was a vegetarian, and teetotaler. He lived the life of restraint, self-control, and discipline.

Harbir Singh Bhanwar, who had a taste for art, had been visiting Sobha Singh since 1960-61. He was a schoolteacher at the village Tatehal, and stayed at Andretta. As the time passed, he became devoted to the artist, started doing small chores in the house, and became almost a family member. He got married in 1962, and his wife Gurcharan Kaur, also started accompanying him to Sobha Singh. At her very first visit, she recognized her father, who had died, in him. Gradually, this father-daughter relationship developed and became strong. They called Inder Kaur as "Mata Ji" – dear mother.

Inder Kaur's health became deteriorated. Four years before her death, Gurcharan Kaur and Harbir Singh shifted to

Sobha Singh, with their son. The entire responsibility of looking after her, managing the household, and attending the guests fell on the shoulder of Gurcharan Kaur. Inder Kaur had to be admitted to the Victoria Jubilee Hospital, Amritsar. The doctors found her beyond cure and she was brought back to Andretta. She breathed her last at the age of 55 years, in 1965, while Sobha Singh was away to Chandigarh. He had to give final touches to his painting of Guru Gobind Singh. Sobha Singh could not reach back home in time for her cremation. Her last rites were performed by Gurcharan Kaur and Harbir Singh.

The house became very lonely after the death of Mrs. Sobha Singh. Harbir Singh and Gurcharan Kaur continued to stay with him for the time being. It was not possible for Sobha Singh to take care of things. They became fully responsible for the care of Dar ji, his house, guests and visitors.

Dar ji had grown frail with age and needed help even for his minor needs. Gurcharan Kaur accompanied him wherever he went. She served him with great affection and he would say, "At this age she is my daughter. Older, she would have been my sister, and older still my mother." It was this care which kept this fragile man active. He often said that she had realized that she had to keep him alive so that a few more paintings may be offered to the world.

On 15th May 1968 about three years old Bittu, son of Harbir Singh-Gurcharan Kaur fell unguarded into the water tank and drowned. It was a great tragedy. Dar ji felt a sort of guilt and realizing it to be his responsibility towards Harbir Singh and Gurcharan, pressed them to stay with him permanently. Later, Harbir Singh had a job in the Agriculture University, Palampur, and afterwards he became a journalist.

### **Artist's House**

This house is maintained as it was at his death about fifteen years ago.

Sobha Singh moved to Andretta in 1947, went to Delhi for a brief interval, and came back soon. To begin with, he lived as Norah Richards' tenant for some time. Later, he purchased a plot of his own and in 1949, built a room on it. He shifted to this one-room house and kept on adding to it gradually. Towards the east of the house is a semicircular verandah and in front of it a circular tank. The main building, at the outskirts of the village is towards the roadside. In the background of the house is the

snow-capped Dhauladhar mountain. At the end of the slope on the back of the house runs a mountain brook teeming with fish. There are only a few houses between his house and the stream. In the middle of the tank there is a tall pedestal and on it sits a terra-cotta mountain goat. It is a gift from an Italian artist. The tank adds beauty to the house and as well, serves as the water storage. From this side of the house, one gets an enchanting view of the dawn.

On the front of the house, done in plaster, is "Grow More Good." Right corner of the house, on its outer side, has been built as a triangle tapering upwards. From the bottom upward, this triangle is inclined backwards. At the top of this triangle sits the bust of the famous actor Prithvi Raj Kapoor. At the bottom of the triangle is a small pool. The window of the master bedroom-cum-studio, looking towards the west, is besides this triangle.

The main building has a master bedroom with attached bath. Adjoining to this is the art gallery. Another bedroom and bath are on its northern side. The doors of all these main rooms open into the semicircular verandah. The first floor has a bedroom, a prayer room and a toilet, besides a porch looking towards the mountains.

The paintings are hung in the verandah. It has a big cage of parakeets – mini parrots, and sparrows. Therein, are earthen pots for the birds to rest and lay eggs. The birds make a lot of chirping with the daybreak and sunset. There are chairs in the verandah to sit in and enjoy the dawn, mountains, clouds and, sky.

The main bedroom has an easel of the artist in front of the western window. On the northern side of the room, beside the easel, is the bed of Dar ji. A few shelves in the wall beside the bed are meant to keep his selected books and other articles of his need e.g., water bottle, thermos, alarm clock, radio, table-lamp, etc. - everything within his easy reach. A niche in the southern wall has another small easel especially for Gurcharan Kaur. Between the two easels is his writing table and telephone. On the eastern wall, in a vertical concavity is the statue of M.S. Randhawa. Once, the innocent people took this as a god and offered flowers to it.

The walls of the room, his bed covering, carpet and curtains has very soothing light colors. He himself wore the clothes of subdued hues, to leave the paintings hanging on the walls prominent. His neat and tidy room is set in a very elegant,

artistic taste. The visitors have to leave their shoes outside his room. A mild incense, or a potpourri spray, is used to keep it sweet smelling. A small window in the left corner of the room always has flowers in the vase. His bathroom has neatly arranged bottles of light perfumes, shampoos and oils.

The house is well spread out. The kitchen is away from the main building, and is an extension of a separate room with an attic above it. Dar ji believed, "The plan of your house is the projection of your mind. Proverb is, you know of the dweller from the front door of his house. A spread out plan and spacious rooms usually assert that the occupant is broadminded, and a guest is welcome here." He used to say, "Like art that serves life, a house should serve the guest. A visitor should feel free and not confined in the house, and he should get a desire to come again."

Dar ji himself came out to see off the guest warmly and used to say, "I hope, you liked the place and this small house. Please, do come again!"

Sobha Singh loved Manali, 30 miles from Kullu. It is bowl-like valley with snow covered mountains around it. The glow in the valley is enchanting. Once, he pointed out, "You will not get this glow anywhere else. It enchants me. I come here to enjoy it!"

In February 1975, Dar ji returned from Manali and two days later he felt a little discomfort in his chest. He was taken to the military hospital in the Holta Camp, at Palampur. It turned out to be a heart problem. Dr. Dhanwant Singh Thind, an eye surgeon there, took personal care. Dar ji became stable in a couple of days. On discharge from the hospital, Dr. Dhanwant Singh escorted him to Andretta. Sobha Singh, thanked the doctor and retorted, "The Lord wants me to serve the people a little more. I want to take out maximum from this life to serve the humanity."

## VI FRIENDS

A visitor was always welcome to his house. He took time off from his busy routine to be with the guests, or mildly excused himself by telling to join them after finishing the paint on the brush lest it dried there. Harbir Singh and Gurcharan Kaur attended to the guests in his absence. Sobha Singh got a small mud cottage constructed in the forest on the side of a hill, at a small pool made by the rain water drain. It was kept tidy. Here, he spent some lonely moments for contemplating. Some guests enjoyed this lonely spot. There was no fear of bears or leopards in this area.

Sobha Singh enjoyed the company of his friends. He said, "Out of getting together with friends, I try to derive as much joy I can. The people, mostly make friends in need."

He attracted a large number of admirers and visitors to his house. His wife was an excellent host and they all appreciated the warm-hearted couple. He came in contact with eminent persons who had made their mark in the different spheres of society. His acquaintances belonged to all walks of life. Dar ji had a wide circle of admirers and they kept on visiting him even though he was at a remote and isolated place. Dar ji received them warmly, kept them with him with love and saw them off affectionately. Any one who visited him, became his fan

Talks of Dar ji, based on his experience, learning and wisdom, kept the visitors mystified. A visitor got enriched by meeting him, felt compensated for his tiring journey and drove satisfaction. The new visitors and old friends kept visiting Dar ji.

Mrs Sobha Singh was an excellent host, although she kept unhappy due to lack of her own child and ill health. Dar ji could not regain his health due to overwork and lack of rest, besides other things. His left leg had shortened making him handicapped. Perhaps, due to over-concentration on his paintings, his hearing started failing as it usually had been with many artists of repute. Even with all these shortcomings, they both never gave a chance to any one to complain. They welcomed everyone though they had to sacrifice their own time and comfort. This kept the circle of his fans and admirers expanding.

Besides the friends and relatives, many other visitors also came to Dar ji. He often told, "There are many who come to show themselves off. Some, come to talk about themselves and don't listen to anyone. Others, come around Palampur and get an idea of a cursory visit to this place. There are those who visit but do not appreciate any difference whether they have come here or not, whereas some get completely transformed." He meant that a visit should be specific i.e. one should come with the purpose of visiting, and something should be gained out of it.

Pandit Mangat Ram of Andretta was a good friend of Dar ji. After retiring from the government service, he settled here. Dar ji's house was adjacent to it. He could play violin and visited Dar ji almost daily. He did not attain a very old age.

Beni Parshad, also from Andretta, was a nice person and they were lovable people. He was a good friend of the artist. He was a learned fellow and his hobby was gardening. He was a great help to anyone who came to settle down here.

Nohra Richards, "Mother of the Punjabi Drama," was wife of Mr. P.E. Richards. The old lady lived a short distance away from Dar ji. If he did not visit her for some time, she would send for him, "I haven't spoken English for some days, please come." She lived in a mud house. There was a raised mud-platform in front of it. Here, the village children played dramas under her direction. After her death, her house was badly vandalized and her papers got destroyed.

Amrita Pritam, a well-known Punjabi poetess, was once visiting Dar ji. Dar ji, Amrita and Gurcharan, were meandering through the fields at night. The moon was surrounded by bright stars. The open valley had tall mountains around it. Dar ji pointed out, "How calm and cool it is, Isn't it! A man should always be like that. If I do not get sleep, I come out and watch the moon. Within minutes my nerves get soothed, I go in and immediately go to sleep."

Among his friends, Nanak Singh, the known Punjabi novelist, was a good friend from his younger days. Nanak Singh read his own novels to Dar ji who would often criticize him saying that he was a very good short-story writer and not that good a novelist. Both could easily read each other's mind and each sought much-needed solace and inspiration from other. Kartar Singh Hitkari, father of the known Punjabi poetess and novelist Amrita Pritam, was his old friend. Gurbaksh Singh of *Preet Lari* fame and a pioneer prose-writer in Punjabi, was also



a good friend and admirer of Sobha Singh. Amar Singh, a portrait painter who settled in Chandigarh, and Mehar Singh who went to Delhi as an artist, were more of disciples than friends. Dr. Karam Singh Grewal, an orthopedic surgeon of Amritsar, was also an admiring friend and frequently visited him at Andretta. Dr. Grewal asked about a life after death. Dar ji said, "Everything will finish after death. You fear loss of possession and individuality after death. You should forget the past and the future and bring in the present. Even if you come to know of the after death state, what will be the good?"

From the film-world, Rajinder Singh Bedi, storywriter and filmmaker, and Prithvi Raj Kapur, the well-known stage and film actor, were also great friends and admirers of Sobha Singh. Prithvi Raj told Dar ji that his son got a prize for good rehearsal and asked him to open his account, but he told his son that in such a case he would have to leave the house. Dar ji said, "We should have the relationship of love with our children. Today, you are caring and providing for them. Tomorrow, they should take your charge from heart and not as a convention." Mohinder Singh Randhawa an I.C.S. officer and a man with artistic and aesthetic sensibilities, had deep regard for Sobha Singh. He purchased several of his paintings, especially the one with Guru Gobind Singh on the horseback, which the artist had especially made on a request from Maharaja Yadavindra Singh of Patiala. Randhawa acquired it for the Chandigarh Art Museum in 1968.

Maharaja Karan Singh, a great lover of art, was a genuine admirer of Sobha Singh and had a separate room reserved for his paintings in his palace. Later, he dedicated this room to the nation. In 1954, he acquired the third original painting of "Sohni Mahiwal." The Maharaja also helped artist to get it printed. "Guru Nanak Dev in the blessing attitude with one arm raised," was printed by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar. These paintings made Sobha Singh famous.

Sobha Singh painted the portraits of all the members of the Maharaja's family. He painted Maharani Tara Devi, Karan Singh's mother, in different poses. He made a painting of Neel Kanth Avtar, her personal deity, especially for her. When giving a sitting for her painting, Dar ji set right a few of her stray hair with a rose. She told Maharaja Karan Singh, "He set my hair with a flower, because he is an artist!"

Sobha Singh had great regard and respect for Bhai Sahib Veer Singh, the father of modern Punjabi literature. Once,

he held both the hands of Sobha Singh in his own and blessed, "May Guru Nanak himself manifest in these hands!"

Akhtar Hussain Rai Puri was a good friend of Dar ji. Akhtar was sent by Mahatma Gandhi to Paris for the propaganda work about India. Madanjit Singh, a businessman of Chandigarh, Akhtar Husain Raipuri, Kahan Singh from Nabha, and Diwan Singh Kalepani were great admirers of the artist and would often call on him at Andretta.

Among other friends and admirers could be included the names of Gurcharan Singh (of Blue Art Pottery); Dr. S.S. Manchanda (a child specialist); Dr. Charanjit Singh (Director Agriculture, H.P. Government); Mr. J.L. Malhotra (HP Public Service Commission); Mr. Sunika Ram Bhandari (Sarpanch of Andretta – an understanding and accommodating Sarpanch – head-man of the village. He gave a piece of land to Dar ji for his small cottage in the hill); Mr. Mansa Ram (Palampur); Sardar Surjit Singh Barnala (A Minister); Professor Prem Singh (Govt. College of Arts, Chandigarh); Mr. Harbans Singh Bura (Chandigarh); Mr. Piara Singh (Income Tax Officer, Palampur); Dr. Dhanwant Singh Thind (Eye-specialist, army hospital, Palampur); Mr. Shiv Nath Mehta; Dr. S.S. Johl (Administrator and economist). Dr. Man Singh Nirankari (Amritsar); Dr. Harcharan Singh (Physician of Amritsar); Professor Sahib Singh (The Sikh exegete); and his son Dr. Daljit Singh, a well-known eye-surgeon. He operated his left eye for cataract. Harbhajan Singh Bajwa, photo-artist from Batala, was more like his student.

Dr. Victor Rambo, a missionary eye-surgeon, was another welcome visitor to his studio at Andretta. Whenever the doctor organized a free eye camp at Palampur, the town would come alive with patients and their attendants. He kept the patients at Beetang Hall. During partition, Mr. Beetang rescued many Hindu children, kept them here and saved them. Rambo and his wife stayed a few miles away at Raison. To justify the use of van of his unit, he would start calling, "Anyone needing a lift, please!" Once, Sobha Singh visited them and he was surprised to see them putting up in the servants' quarter. His wife was reading the mail and he himself was typing the replies. Both were sitting on a rickety wooden cot. Impressed by their dedication, Sobha Singh made a painting of Rambo, and presented it to him as a token of gratitude of the grateful people.

Among other admirers of Sardar Sobha Singh can be included Mr. Amin-ul-din Ahmad Khan, the Governor of Himachal Pradesh, who, after the Convocation of Himachal

University was over, learnt of the artist's presence among the audience and came hurriedly to him saying that he did not know that such a great man was sitting there. Sanjiva Reddy, the President of India, who also graced the occasion, asked the Governor if he had visited the art gallery of Sobha Singh. When the President and the Governor went there after the function was over, Sobha Singh presented the painting of Mahatma Gandhi to Sanjiva Reddy. This painting now adorns the walls of the Rashtarpati Bhawan at New Delhi. The Governors of Punjab D.C. Pavte and M.M. Chowdhri, also used to visit him at Andretta. Governor A.A. Khan, visited the gallery in 1980. The Chief Minister of Himachal, Dr. Y.S. Parmar, was a great admirer and visited Sobha Singh more than once. Dar ji wanted to make his painting, but he was too busy to give the needed sittings. Dar ji suggested him to send his studio photograph, adding, "At the time of getting your photograph, have your mission and ideal in your mind so that the right expression comes to your face." He smiled and said, "Wherever I go only the leaders meet. Nobody tells me of a man of value."

## VII ENGLAND

On 20 June 1972, Sobha Singh left for England along with Gurcharan Kaur (his foster daughter) with the aim of getting some of his paintings quality printed, but the prohibitive costs deterred him. He also took some of his paintings for exhibition. Although people there were much engrossed in things mundane and had no love for art, Hardit Singh Malik showed interest and arranged an exhibition of his paintings in London.

Punjabi poet Shiv Kumar Batalvi also happened to be there those days. One day he was to recite his poems in a function and Sobha Singh presided over that. Dar ji narrated his poem *Kalakar* in his presidential address and asserted, "The world is in need of poets like Guru Tegh Bahadur to show the way to the people." Mrs. Kailash Puri, Editor of *Rupwati*, visited the artist to introduce him to the writers, poets and for the exhibition of his paintings, which however could not materialize because of artist's unexpected indisposition.

When he was sick, an English doctor came to examine him. He took out his hand to feel his pulse, but the artist took his hand out and shook it warmly. Impressed, the Doctor said, "It's an honor to shake hands with an eminent artist like you."

In 1978, Surjit Singh Barnala, then a Cabinet Minister in the Indian Union Government and a good painter himself, took him to Rome with him. Sobha Singh desired to see the works of the old masters and to get some books on them. London is a tourist resort and so the shelves get cleared as soon as they are stocked. He could hardly find a few books, and those available cost a fortune. Everyone was busy there and he could go out mostly on weekends when the bookshops generally remained closed. He could not find much.

He went to London in 1981 again and stayed with his friend Harbans Singh Bura. He had artistically landscaped his spacious bungalow. Impressed by this, the artist painted its two scenes. From there, he visited Switzerland. A visitor expressed his desire to change his religion. Dar ji asked him to bring Bible and read a certain page. He went back beaming with satisfaction. Sobha Singh remarked, "We have got everything in our own house, but the tyranny is that we don't peep into it." On an invitation from the Sikh community in New Castle, again he went to England on 15 July 1984, and stayed with Santokh

Singh Parmar. He painted a very large painting of Guru Gobind Singh in one and a half months and presented it to the Gurdwara in New Castle.

During his stay there, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) made a documentary on him. Replying to a question he said, "The learned one becomes egotistic and does not want to learn anything, whereas the mediocre one though educated wants to learn more." The interviewer remarked, "Yes Sir. Krishnamurthi said the same thing." The BBC team had reserved a full ferry to videotape the interview. When it was televised, a postman watched him saying, "The front of my house bears GROW MORE GOOD done in plaster." He was talking on goodness. The postman called on him to say that he had never heard such an advice ever before.

The Lord Mayor of New Castle invited him to his house. He took the opportunity to meet the Lord Mayors of Glasgow, Leeds and Liverpool on their requests. He was invited to preside over a Hindu Conference in Leeds. Due to his poor health, he performed its opening ceremony only and regretted his inability to continue in the President's chair for the entire duration of the function.

He was invited to witness the selection of a priest for the opening ceremony of a church. The Chief Judge and other judges in their wigs and official regalia were there. A brass band played when they came out after the meeting. Dar ji was much impressed and remarked, "The dignity of religion is imperative to keep you above the mundane desires."

A carpenter, who occasionally framed the paintings for Dar ji, presented him with two small books of poetry. Dar ji was overjoyed with his affection and warmth. He said, "An unconditioned affection free from hypocrisy is all that is needed."

A dental surgeon's wife, from Devon (England) one day came with her brother, his wife, her daughter and mother to New Castle to meet the artist. She desired the artist to experience the life in an English home. She took him to Devon. He felt that Devon was a paradise in England. It had beautiful rolling hills and lovely green dales. The expansive sea was close by. About a furlong (220 yards) of the meandering path passing through tall, green pines led to her house set in picturesque background. Her husband was a surgeon. After his work, he would sit in lobby and relax. "This is the way to live, work with your heart and soul, and afterwards relax completely," remarked Dar ji. When Sobha

Singh was leaving, the surgeon came out his surgery for three minutes to see him off. Dar ji appreciated their warmth and devotion.

Dar ji went to Plymouth where Columbus had visited. There were nice peaches. After eating one, Sobha Singh was ready to throw away its stone on the seashore, but the host promptly took it into his hand and put it into a trash bag. The artist thanked and conjectured, "A nation so conscious of hygiene is sure to live long!"

During this trip to England, Sobha Singh went to Norway and stayed there for two weeks with Jagdip Kaur, wife of Gian Singh. He was pleased to learn that people there loved their King so much that they gifted him a ship on his eightieth birthday. The people in Norway were so much pleased with Gustove, a Norwegian sculptor for his works, that the municipality provided him with a house and a studio. After his death, it was converted into a memorial with a six-acre garden having replicas of his sculptures. He expressed, "In fact, art is meant for the people and this is how an artist should be recognized by them."

With new experiences and ideas, Sobha Singh returned to India on 19 October 1984. During this trip, he visited Canada, also. There he stayed with Vidya Sagar Sharma, originally a native of Balu, five kilometers from Andretta. He adored the artist. After 1984 riots he wanted Sobha Singh to shift to Canada permanently. After the death of Indira Gandhi and anti-Sikh pogroms at several places, there was pressure on him to move to the Punjab. But Himachal Pradesh was in his blood, and he was determined not to move from Andretta, though earlier, he had visited a few towns especially in the vicinity of Ludhiana for a possible place to shift. T.C. Janartha, Additional District Magistrate, District Kangra, stationed at Dharamsala, took personal interest in the security of Dar ji.

The fame of Sobha Singh, as a painter-artist gradually spread far and wide. He was very popular in the Punjab, and was a well known figure all over India. He had many fans in the neighboring and distant countries like England, America and Canada. Despite name and fame, he was free from any ego and sophistry. He was, in his own words of modesty, a life-long learner. He had a busy schedule while in Delhi, but found time to read his favorite authors like Walt Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Krishnamurthi, Tolstoy, Ruskin, Khalil Gibran (Kahlil Gibran) and others. Lt. Col. Glover at Baghdad had tutored him

in English and *The Pleasures of Life* was the first book which he gave him to start with. It was a philosophical work. This blossomed into his love for literature. He built up a good personal library. appreciation of literature made him a lover of solitude and liked early morning hours - the ambrosial time which gave him scintillating freshness for self-analysis and creative work.

Dar ji was a literary man and philosopher. His humility and love was an example for others. He lived a simple but noble, dignified, truthful and ethical life. He shared his art with the people and tried to make their lives pleasant and charming. All sorrow and pain this world gave him, he transformed it into pleasure and returned it manifold than what he got.

The duty meant a lot to him and he put it into his practice with great devotion. His philosophy was to give more good to others and he believed, "The man needs more good than food." His message was, "Become a man. A man has become everything but he hates to become the man." This was a message universally true and much relevant to the modern-day life.

He understood a child better, which may perhaps be due to his own difficult childhood. He would advocate, "Treat a child not as an animal, but as an offspring of a man. Consider him as your family member and an equal. Honor the sentiments as well as the dreams of your child. Share with the child the joys and sorrows of your family, and enable him or her to stand on his or her own feet. Don't be hypocritical, but be sincere and truthful in appreciating your child and do not use this as a bribe. Do not encourage your child to have wrong ambitions, but teach him to live an ethical life. Always give justice to your child so that he or she can be expected to deliver the same to others. You yourself should set an example by practicing what you want your child to become. A child should not be neglected. Develop his, her, dignity and provide your full protection. Understand your children. Their weaknesses should be considered as their problems and not as their viles."

His views regarding Sikh culture were : "The glory of the Sikh culture was the product of martyrdoms and sacrifices. The efforts of the seers and saints were there, too. If we want to bring back the lost glory, then we will have to work very hard by living a life free from greed, hatred, indiscrimination, envy and animosity. Leave your bad qualities home when visiting a Gurdwara and from there bring the feelings of love, service,

truth, devotion, sacrifice, etc. - all good qualities. You should believe in your Gurus and give up hypocrisy, ego and discord. Use the ability that God has given you for the uplift of the humanity."

The opinion of Dar ji to celebrate the third centenary of Guru Gobind Singh was sought. He advised, "Be a Sikh." He further said, "When I contemplate on Guru Gobind Singh, I see his pointing finger demanding your head so that he may give you a new one to make you think of your duty, and if need be to offer it for your religion - the truth. He wants also, to give you a new head which can think for your rights and of liberty. A befitting celebration should revive this spirit." He further advised, "One should realize one's specific quality and go on experimenting on that without caring whether others value, or recognize that or not. It will lead to liberation and will give bliss. We should try to infuse this characteristic in others." He went on, "We will have to learn the sense of sharing too. A man is different from animals in that he not only shares, but even gives his whole bread to appease the hunger of the other. This attitude should be cultivated in the people so that they can experience satisfaction and inward joy."

Talking on the mission of his life, Dar ji said, "The mission of my life is to live according to the dictates of Sikhism. In my life, I have worked to attain this. In this effort, I have placed before the masses the paintings of Gurus and avatars (incarnations – Hindu gods) for them to realize that they can live that life if they have a will."



## VIII ART OF THE MASTER

On the often-asked question whether the artist is born or is made, at another occasion Sobha Singh elucidated, "A mango is a mango right from the beginning. But, like a mango plant, the artist too can be grafted, but one can grow only on the foundation of his original genius, and the natural inherent inspiration." On the question, "Who inspired you to become an artist," he responded, "The rose blooms without any outside inspiration. The inspiration is needed by the novice or the ignorant. When there is single-mindedness the inspiration arises from within. This is a blessing from within, and it needs no external source. A tree keeps growing and at the right time it bears flowers which change into fruits. This of course is gradual, but is a continuous process. Same way, painting a portrait is the response to the inner soul!" He would explain, "When moon rises from behind the mountain, it is so smooth. Nothing is achieved by long strides or jumps. The progress is always steady and it has its own dignified way, there is nothing abrupt. Same is with the success in art. When something is there within, it will need no inspiration." He believed that to become something, one has to have its genes right from the birth.

Sobha Singh displayed the traits of an artist ever since his childhood. He filled up his time sketching on sand and sculpting sandstones. He was hardly seven when he could draw the profile of a friend. At home, he watched his father drawing and painting. Later, he stayed with his brother-in-law Lachhman Singh who was a draftsman at Amritsar. The Principal of the Industrial School at Amritsar noticed the talent in him and encouraged him to do portraits. His training at home and school enabled him to join army at Amritsar as a draftsman. By then, he was proficient in painting. During his service at Baghdad, he had lot of free time to practice his hobby. Lieutenant Colonel Glover, who himself painted, encouraged him in his hobby. There, he also got an opportunity of watching the color-mixing techniques of Lt. Rigdon and others who painted during their spare time in the army camp.

Sobha Singh's mother died when he was still a child. His father was a strict and hard disciplinarian. The only benign personality who was sympathetic towards him during those days was the loving daughter-in-law of Rai Sahib at Sri Hargobindpur.

The inalienable bond with the memory of his mother was so strong that whenever he drew, it turned out to be the face of this gentle lady. In truth, his mind kept seeking the mother all his life - love in the person of a mother: a universal mother. Out of his yearning to experience the motherly love "The Woman" who is a mother, sister, daughter and also, wife, evolved and his paintings had a strong tinge of it, emerging as it were, from his subconscious mind.

As he evolved in his thinking, the innate maternal love attracted him to the selfless love and sacrifices of the lovers. He painted Sassi-Punnu, Hir-Ranjha, Sohni-Mahiwal and other lovers. Later, he realized that the unrequited love was always sweet. The legends of Heer-Ranjha, and Sassi-Punnu became immortal only because the lovers could not be successful in their pursuits. He realized, "One who flows along the events, will not get entangled in the love," and stopped painting lovers.

The love and devotion of the Bhaktas (devotees) made deep impact on him and he started painting them. Later, he thought that Bhakti (devotion) was merely an escape and the Bhaktas always expressed their longing for the unknown and were a frustrated lot. He stopped painting them, too.

At Amritsar, Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919, made him contemplate to develop and apply his painting trait for the elevation of man. He settled at Amritsar in Jallianwala Bagh area on his return from Basra-Baghdad. Here, he set up his first studio as a professional artist. There, he very closely observed the Sikh struggle for the liberation of *Gurdwaras* – Sikh temples, from the shackles of the British Government supported *Mahants* (priests). The absolute dedication and the spirit of sacrifice of those freedom fighters made him realize that the Sikh Gurus were supreme who inspired their disciples with a very keen desire to live free and with dignity. Sobha Singh felt that the art must speak to the inner self of a man, and so he started to paint the Gurus. He strongly felt that only the Gurus could liberate a man. He desired man's liberation both in the spiritual and in the mundane aspects. He learnt it with his personal experience and stuck to it forever to uplift the common man.

Sobha Singh did not join any art-school. He could not afford it. He kept his eyes wide open and mind ever alert to pick up and experiment with the techniques of painting, and he perfected them with his natural talent. He would say, "Does a sparrow ask how to build a nest, and where when and how it should lay eggs? Rose never asks as to how it should become a

rose. It flows with its life. Cut its one branch and it throws out three more. The genius keeps on evolving by itself," and added, "Environment and conditions have their effect. It is insignificant, but if the lead of pencil gets broken while drawing, whole of the mood of the artist gets upset." The search for the solitude brought the artist ultimately to Andretta, where he could paint without any interruption and disturbance. He asserted, "My religion is beauty, and beauty demands full attention." If someone asked as to why did he leave Delhi? He responded, "To live with my own life."

Sobha Singh would contemplate deeply on an idea of a painting and would develop its physical as well as its spiritual form. Then he would paint it inside out, i.e. he would bring the spirituality within into its outer physical form. He would study all available literature on the subject and would develop its qualities into its visible characteristics. He would pick up the brush only when his contemplated painting evolved into a vivid picture in his mind. Besides the facts, he had to bring in a very strong play of imagination into the process to weave out and achieve the final form. It demanded great concentration. After that, once at the easel, he would sometimes finish the painting in a single sitting. This would need sitting for full day and even night. He completed the painting of Guru Hargobind in a single sitting of 26 hours. It was not unusual for him to keep painting for 12 to 18 hours continuously. He would get up in the middle of the night to start retouching and altering the painting. It went on till he was absolutely satisfied with the end product.

He would get totally lost in the painting and would not even notice anyone approaching or talking to him. He painted with devotion and concentration. When painting the Gurus, sometimes he got deeply absorbed to the point of meditation. He would actually see the Guru he wanted to paint. Once, a visitor who happened to watch him painting in this ecstatic state, remarked, "Guru Gobind Singh himself seemed to hold his hand to paint." A wave of bliss would come over him while painting, and it would take him into transcendental state above the mundane. At such moments of his joy, there appeared a glow on his face reflecting the blissful state of his mind. Dar ji lived his devotional art and worshipped it. He believed, "If work is not a worship, then it is no work at all."

As to how much time a painting takes, his reply was, "It is not a mathematical proposition. If I get disturbed while painting, God knows as to when I will be in a proper frame of

mind to start it again. Painting needs the right mood. Visitors keep interrupting and I have to struggle much to bring back the lost concentration. A painting is complete when it takes up right expression etched on your mind. This takes time. Today you think the painting is complete, but the very next day at a more elevated mental level, you start changing the rhythm and the balance of it. The quality of canvas, paints and brushes may fail to come up to your expectation. This will spoil your mood and you may have to wait long to get the right material. Maybe that you have to change your technique as a solution to this problem. This experimenting may take a lot of your time. Considering all these factors, it is hard to fix up a time limit to complete a painting."

Once, he was asked, "How many paintings you have done so far?" He gave a broad smile, "What else I have been doing all my life? Maybe, hundreds? I have no record. At Lahore, a friend of Kartar Singh, from Shekhupura, borrowed my painting for an exhibition and he never returned these. Many originals were left at Lahore during partition of India, in 1947. Those could not be retrieved. Painting is a creation and so redoing them was out of question." While elaborating on this, he brought in a question, "Tell me, please, how much time the creation of God – evolution, took to take its present form?" He continued, "The process of creation still continues and it will continue for ever. A single perfect painting in the lifetime of an artist is enough. But, are you sure that anything here is perfect? The old masters became famous for their single painting. They became immortal because they contributed to the humanity what others could not. They added to the beauty of life and to the harmony of love. They also gave charm to the song of the nature. Our aim should be to give something that helps to evolve the people. Such a single thing is priceless."

He elaborated, "Painting a Guru, the painter has to bring his devotion to a very high pitch, and to maintain his total surrender to his subject. His success is always proportionate to his self-negation, because he does not paint what he wants or when he wants, but follows what he calls the dictates of his subconscious mind - the image that gets fixed into his mind by deeply meditating on his subject. This needs great patience."

He maintained, "The first success of an artist is to attain single-mindedness in his effort, the second is the completion of the painting, and the third is to bring out the right expression in his work which is his real achievement. Out of this, he is

rewarded with bliss which is an effortless realization that the painting has turned out to be what he never thought of."

The imagination also played its role, but the reality could not be ignored. This made him a realistic-artist. He dressed Guruji in conventional clothes - something not from the distant past but from the present. This made the Gurus appear as one of us. He selected verses from *gurbani* to give captions to the paintings, especially of the Gurus. This added to the effect of a painting and, according to the artist, the caption taken from the scriptures magnified the grandeur of the painting and this helped in uniting a man with the Guru. "A painting adopts a personality," said the artist. "When I am painting a Guru, I am in his company," Sobha Singh used to say.

"Sohni Mahiwal" was a 'person' to the artist and not a mere painting. He believed, "We can't say how many lives it took to complete this painting. The idea might have arisen in a certain life. After that, God knows how many lives it took for that idea to develop! Ultimately, it was painted in this life. It is still imperfect, and perhaps it may take many more lives to perfect it." He claimed, "It has taken ages to paint Sohni. She has become my child now - a manifestation of life." People praised and complimented him on the creation of this painting. He would confess with humility, "The technique is mine no doubt, but the art in me is God given. I too, belong to Him. All this is His Grace! It is His Greatness that he blessed on me the duty of painting the Gurus." Once, a hill woman, watching this painting in the studio said, "He took out his soul and put that into it!" He painted these lovers intertwined in their final union.

"I may adopt a line or two or a general configuration of a model, but I cannot accept him to represent a Guru," spoke Sobha Singh talking of a model. To find a model in a small hill village was out of question. He might use a visitor, generally a relative or a friend, or his own reflection in the mirror to study various effects. In fact, he did not much believe in using a model and it had not been his method.

For color-mixing, shading and to get subtle effects, he had his own "trick-nique!" - 'trick' plus 'technique;' the term coined by him. He had his own formulas for balancing and harmonizing his paintings. He took utmost care to keep the lines, forms and the colors very natural and pleasing to the eyes. He gave right perspective and ground to the central figure in his painting to keep it in prominence. With this in mind, he himself

wore the clothes of light natural shades, and did not keep gaudy articles in his room, studio or gallery.

His paintings looked true in essence. These were not wooden - without expression and features. He did not paint fairy-tale long eyelashes, mystical long curved eyes and mythical high curved nose. His characters looked absolutely right from their established traits, and according the occasions. They were never romantically poised. Guru Nanak was set in a meditative mood, and Guru Gobind Singh looked majestic. Guru Nanak was a perfect person and did not need a rosary to show his spirituality.

Guru Gobind Singh was given a clean sword, because passing through neck fast it may not get stained. Sri Krishna appeared like a warrior, and not like a woman as the artists in general painted him. Arjun was painted as a brave fighter. The dreamy artists in the past failed to represent the truth. They clothed these warriors like women and gave them feminine figures. Sri Krishna should have been painted to bring out his greatness as a soldier. " Dar ji explained, " I have given the dress of a saint to Guru Nanak and the robe of a king to Guru Gobind Singh. Guru Gobind Singh had to awaken the dormant spirit of the down-trodden, and it might have been his divine politics to dress and live like a king, ride a horse supporting a falcon on his hand, keep soldiers and build fortresses so that the people got inspiration and followed him with faith for the cause." "But, in the process, the sensitivity of the painting has also to be retained," he added. He believed that the duty of an artist was to paint the evolution of the soul, and whatever he will paint with this attitude will attain immortality.

"The painting must mould the character of the beholder so that his life gets more enriched," the artist elucidated. He desired every house to have a painting of the Guru, which should be placed in a manner that each member of the family catches its glimpse daily. This would inspire the individual to live an ethical life.

He claimed, "I have painted to regenerate the heritage of the people, so that coming generations will know their roots and the past glories. This is very important for keeping the nations alive. Where will the people be if they do not know the events which made the history, especially those which brought peace and awakening? The coming of the Sikh Gurus on this earth was a great event in the history of the mankind. To have a better world, it is important that the contact of the masses is

retained with the Gurus. The history is handed down by the writers or by the narrators: bards etc. Reading, saying and listening needs time. The world has become so busy that the individuals have little time for such vocations. Listening and reading could create the impact only when one is in the proper mood. If there is one painting, even ten persons may look it at the same time. If there are 25,000 prints of it, about 250,000 people will see it together. If the souls of even a few people get stirred this way, the artist is amply rewarded for his labor." He added, "I am talking of the constructive mood. The mood is a very powerful tool. It can have a strong negative effect too. You take everything according to your mood. I visited an old friend of mine at Bombay. There was a baby girl of about one and a half years. I affectionately addressed her as *munni* – a little girl. It also, means 'with cut hair.' Cutting hair is a taboo for the Sikhs. Notwithstanding his old friendship, his expression and attitude immediately changed. I tell you another incident. Giani Kartar Singh Hitkari, father of Amrita Pritam, gave me an affectionate care because of my polite nature. Once I became neurasthenic. He called me to Dalhousie for a change. He had rented a bungalow there. Just to caution him, I wrote that what to talk of a hostile word, even a thought of it will be a sword to me. The Giani misunderstood me and he was so much upset that he ignored telegram of my arrival and was not at home when I reached there. I had to spread my bed on the floor of the verandah of his huge house to lie down. It disappointed me. Such is the mood! We should always try to have a mood of a high order to get inspiration, say from a painting."

Sobha Singh never painted pain and misery. He believed, lot of it is already there around us, and we should not add any more to it. He asserted, "Painting is a powerful means, and the artist has great responsibility." He gave credit for his memorable creations to God's Grace.

"Only a creative artist can lead the masses, and it demands a real high character. Any one who has no moral character has no right to be called an artist. Creativeness needs a lot of attention. The attention consumes energy, and it is attained through calmness. Absolute concentration is required to create something," asserted Dar ji. He believed, an artist had to live by his virtues and not by wine and viles, whether one be painter, sculptor, poet or anything else. "We don't need sentimentalists. We need those like Gurus who can show the way," he would say.

He had nothing much to say about the modern art. "The world is full of creativity, much of which an ordinary man does not understand easily. I feel that the art should be self-explanatory. No one else should have to explain it. It should have some purpose and meaning," he explained.

The development of Sobha Singh's painting technique gave a new trend to the subtle art, its many features stood out clearly in his unique style, and it was complete in itself. He perfected his art of painting in his own way. The appearance, expression, dress, background etc. of the central figure made it look natural and acceptable. His subjects were never from the other world which we have not seen, or about which we know nothing, but were from this world and were quite familiar to us.

Through his paintings he desired the evolution of the man and he contributed to the love, beauty and grandeur of the world. With delicate strokes of his brush and sensitive colors, he weaved the highest philosophy of the truth, love of the ecstatic beauty, and bliss. He did not use indirection of fear to keep the man on right path. He kept dejection, disillusionment, failure, frustration, cruelty and ugliness away from the human eyes. He always painted the positive attributes of life. His subjects mostly were the Gurus, *avtars* - divine incarnations, and he gave us the Devotional Art - the symphony of devotion in painting.

His works were exhibited in the Fine Arts Society, Simla; the Fine Arts Society, Bombay; All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, Delhi; Indian Academy of Fine Arts, Amritsar; the Sikh Central Museum, Amritsar; Ambala, Chandigarh, Lahore and in England at Southall.

Dr. Karan Singh, Maharaja of Jammu & Kashmir, acquired a big collection of his paintings and reserved a separate room in his palace for them. The Maharaja of Porbandar and the Nizam of Hyderabad (Salar Jang Museum) also had collections of his works. Many of his paintings were placed in the Fine Arts Museum, Chandigarh. The Governor's House and Punjab Assembly at Chandigarh; Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar; Punjabi University, Patiala; Municipal Committee, Amritsar; the Sikh Central Museum, Amritsar; and museums at Ambala and Simla had his paintings. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar; and Guru Nanak Engineering Works, Goraya, had a painting each with their publishing rights with them. There were many others who had his paintings as their private possessions. The



Parliament House, New Delhi, had a huge panel showing the development of Sikhism from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh. Many of his works were exhibited in countries like England, America, Canada and Australia, and some paintings were sold there without keeping records. M/s Gulab Singh and Sons, New Delhi; the Asia Press and Imperial Manufacturer Co., Dr. M.S. Randhawa got some of his paintings. Dr. Karam Singh Grewal has his own portrait done by Dar ji. Dr. Daljit Singh, Eye Surgeon, Amritsar has a painting of his father created by the Artist.

At least in Punjab, anywhere you may go, you will very likely find at least one print of any one of his paintings in almost every house. In other countries, you will find such prints particularly in most of the Punjabi houses. Hem Kunt is 15,200 feet above the sea level and Hazoor Sahib is more than 1,000 miles away from the Punjab, the *Gurdwaras* at both the places have these prints.

The famous paintings of the Sikh Gurus done by the artist were and still are Guru Nanak Dev, Guru Gobind Singh and Guru Tegh Bahadur. Sohni-Mahiwal was and even now is, very popular in the general masses. His other paintings which had been printed were Guru Arjan Dev, Sri Krishana, Guru Hargobind, Sri Rama Avtar, Guru Angad Dev and Jesus Christ bearing the Cross. Baba Farid, Maharana Partap, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Kanwar Naunihal Singh, Shahjahan-Mumtaz, Daughter of Aurangzeb, belong to the history of the recent past. His other paintings of the present history were Sardar Bhagat Singh, Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Norah Richards and Indira Gandhi. His philosophical works on canvas were The Dawn, A Bride, Swamiji, The Soldier, The Snake Charmer Woman and Hir-Ranjha. Besides other paintings, his gallery had his self-portrait and a painting of his wife Mrs. Inder Kaur.

He did some portraits of saints on request from their followers. He made a few portraits of Giani Zail Singh, President of India, Governors, especially of Punjab, Ministers and Chief Ministers.

These are just a few out of a long list. He liked to devote his time and energy to the creative work and was always very reluctant to do any portrait work in general.

## IX POPULAR PAINTINGS

It is very difficult, rather impossible to give a complete and exhaustive list of the paintings done by Sobha Singh. The artist did not keep a record or a count of them. Some of them probably got burnt, or destroyed in the communal frenzy of Hindus and Muslims at the time of partition of India into Pakistan in 1947. He could retrieve not a single painting from his studio in Lahore. His masterpieces have become so popular that they might have since been printed into million copies, or even more.

### **Guru Nanak Dev**

He is the first prophet of the Sikhs who gave the discipline of honest earning, selfless service and faith in one God. He laid stress on noble but simple living and high thinking. He preached equality, love and the dignity of labor. He advocated humility, devotion, protection of the weak and help to the needy.

Guru Nanak never adopted a particular dress. He wore the costume of the place he visited. Sobha Singh painted the Guru the way that he did not appear different from us. In one painting he is shown wearing a cap which is a historical fact. The importance lies in the expression and clothes are merely a support to it. He painted Guru Nanak meditating; blessing with one hand open and held high; proclaiming the unity of God; declaring the omnipresence of God with one arm raised and finger pointing upward; and in many other moods. The artist knew that it was impossible to paint all the moods of Guru Nanak in a single painting, and so he kept on trying to bring out all the aspects and different moods of the Guru in different paintings.

The printing rights of the "Blessing Pose" were with the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar. Its first print was of 25,000 copies followed by one lakh (one hundred thousand) prints more. This print was and still is in great demand. One lakh copies of the first issue of the print of Guru Nanak with a cap on his head, were sold out fast. Another painting of Guru Nanak had Beri (Jujube tree) in the background.

Guru Nanak was perfect and needed no rosary in his hand as other artists usually painted him.

### **Guru Gobind Singh**

Its prints had always been very popular. The Tenth Master was a handsome saint-soldier. He was an apostle of valor and a symbol of supreme sacrifice. He had unparalleled literary acumen with a vast corpus of literature to his credit. He awakened the oppressed masses to fight for their freedom and rights. A perfect leader, he organized Sikhs and baptized them with *amrit* – Holy Water that conferred immortality, and converted them into Singhs literally the lions, and gave them the collective status of the Khalsa, the pure ones.

Dar ji painted Guru Gobind Singh with the following expressions –

*Demanding a Head* - The Guru standing outside a tent with a drawn sword in one hand and one raised finger of the other hand held high demanding a head from the congregation of Sikhs. He needed a man with courage to come forward and offer his head.

*On House Back* – this painting brought out the soldier in him.

*With a Falcon Supported on One Hand* – it showed his sovereignty.

*Asking the Boon of Fearlessness* - *deh siva barr mohe ehae* – God bless with the boon ..... (The Punjab Press, Delhi).

*Zafar Nama* - It was printed by Prasad Press, Madras.

*The Last Resort* - *chun kar az hama heelte dar guzasht, halal ast burdan ba shamsheer dast*: "When all other efforts fail, then it is justified to use the force," showing red fiery eyes of the Guru and a sword in one hand expressing resolve to end the tyranny, and depicting the mood of Guru Gobind Singh when he was given the news of the martyrdom of his two younger sons.

*The Guru in the Fort*. In this painting the Master was seen directing the soldiers in the thick of battle. It had been immensely liked by the people.

In fact, Sobha Singh did not remember as to how many times he painted the Tenth Master. The last in this series was Guru Gobind Singh shown with sparks coming out of his one finger. It showed that the world was burning and he still needed a head.

### **Guru Tegh Bahadur**

To realize the significance and supremacy of Guru Tegh Bahadur, one has just to close eyes for a moment and think on

the events of the life of the Guru from beginning to his martyrdom at the hands of Aurangzeb. The prevalent outrageous tyranny of the cruel people on the hapless masses made Guru Tegh Bahadur contemplate for about twenty-two years to find its solution, which had to be a complete action and not a reaction. The result was the birth of Gobind Rai who came in the world with reforms in his blood. Guru Tegh Bahadur placed a final stamp on the solution by his martyrdom.

Sobha Singh's painting of the Ninth Guru had a philosophical import. Nine candlelights around the hilt of the sword placed before meditating Guru Tegh Bahadur, represent meditation by nine Gurus from Guru Nanak Dev to Guru Tegh Bahadur. The outcome of this contemplation is the sword which represents Guru Gobind Singh as a solution to the prevalent problem. It was the completion of the mission of Guru Nanak Dev which kept on evolving through different Gurus and culminated in the birth of Guru Gobind Singh.

All his paintings, not only of the Gurus and *avtars*, but others as well, aimed at the uplift of the man.

It took a long time for Dar ji to feel satisfied with the final outcome of his this painting. To give it a right perspective, the Guru was painted sitting on a platform, and not on the floor. To eliminate the emptiness of one corner he placed a few flowers there. It took some time to harmonize flowers and their color had to be subdued to keep the central figure in prominence. The light and shade as well as the subtle illumination around the subject was given a very careful thought.

Standing before this painting and looking at it with concentration sends a wave of shiver down the spine. It is an excellent work as far as its impact on the beholder is concerned. It depicts the mastery of the brush and control of technique on the part of the painter.

This painting was completed on the three hundredth birth celebration of Guru Tegh Bahadur. Its 25,000 copies were printed at the Parsad Press, Madras.

### **Guru Hargobind**

Guru Hargobind, the sixth Guru of the Sikhs, is the personification of sovereignty and sainthood. He wore one sword to protect sainthood – protection of faith, and the other for the protection of the poor, downtrodden, needy, and for justice, rights, and liberty. Guru Hargobind, besides his inborn

spirituality, became expert in social service and war to eliminate tyranny as well as injustice.

Only sainthood is not enough and one needs sharp talons as well, for self-defense. Explaining his painting of Guru Hargobind, the artist said, "The sixth Master and Guru Gobind Singh put on the royal regalia and conducted themselves like sovereigns. Both of them have thus been painted with royal grandeur. Every detail in the painting has its significance. The hilt of the sword of Guru Hargobind bears Ik-Oankar ੴ which means all pervading God. The light coming out of it is the light of virtue which has to show the path of justice to the sword, so that it is not used for destruction and it keeps getting direction to be used for self-protection as well as to fight the tyranny which is always born out of injustice. The sword itself, has to protect the truth, i.e. virtue - justice and mercy, to maintain the peace. The swan and ducklings are at the lower end of the sword. A swan is an innocent bird and it can stay on earth, in air and in water. This represents a happy family life in every shade of the society.

### **Guru Arjun Dev**

This painting has well defined halo around the head of the Guru, and outside it is a multicolored aura with a very prominent golden hue. The golden color is the symbol of spirituality.

Guru Arjun Dev and Guru Tegh Bahadur sacrificed themselves to uphold the truth and their martyrdom awakened the masses to fight against injustice and cruelty. Both of them gave their lives to uplift the humanity.

### **Sri Ram Avtar**

Ram Avtar is a symbol of a strong-willed man full of resolve to face the crisis with a smile.

### **Sri Krishana**

This painting has been painted as a royal warrior holding the reins of the horses (control of senses) in one hand and Arjun with the other, urging him with his divine sermons to carry out the will of God by fighting the enemy.

Sri Krishana has been given the features and the body of a real strong man with godly glow and halo of knowledge.

### **Shahid Bhagat Singh**

Bhagat Singh is shown as sitting bare headed on a cot with shackles and handcuffs. The background is filled with a fierce lion jumping out of the toppled British crown, with tricolor - Indian National flag, spread over its back. It depicts the urge of the Indian people for liberty from the British colonialism.

At that time, India was under the British rule and Sardar Bhagat Singh was a very prominent freedom fighter. He was hanged in jail at Lahore, hurriedly cremated on the bank of the river Sutlej at Ferozepur, and his partially burnt remains were thrown into the river. He is a symbol of the Indian freedom.

### **Sohni-Mahiwal**

This painting depicts the love story which reached its culmination in the river Chenab, Punjab, India (Now in Pakistan). Sohni, the potter's daughter, and Izat Beg a trader from Bukhara, are the two involved in this folklore.

On hearing that the potter wove poetry into his pots, Izat Beg went to see him. There he met Sohni. They both fell in love at the first sight. His friend Saadat Ali could not persuade him to return and he alone had to take the caravan back to Bukhara. To be close to Sohni, Izat Beg took a job with the potter and started tending to his buffaloes. This gave him the name of Mahiwal, i.e. one who tends buffalos.

On becoming aware of their love, the potter married his daughter to another man. Mahiwal put on the clothes of a Yogi and started living in a small thatched hut on the other side of the river.

Mahiwal met her daily and would bring roasted fish for her to eat. One day, she noted a dressing on his one thigh. On her asking about it, he told her that he could not catch a fish and carved out his own flesh for her. Since that day Sohni started going to meet him by crossing the river on an earthen pitcher. Her in-laws became suspicious and her sister-in-law replaced Sohni's baked pitcher with an unbaked one. It melted away in the flooded river. Mahiwal heard the cries of drowning Sohni and jumped into the water. Both of them were washed away embraced in their eternal union.

Sohni-Mahiwal is the projection of the artist's mind in the transition period of the evolution of his philosophy. At that time the yearning for his mother and the greatness of love were mixed up and supremacy of a woman had not yet fully emerged in his thinking. Sohni was married to a man not of her choice

and her being in the arms of Mahiwal depicted the urge of a woman to get free from the man's shackles. Sohni was setting a new trend of the woman's lib in the society in which man predominated. She represented an ideal of complete womanhood that had set up a high aim to achieve for which no sacrifice was too great. The artist had given a new meaning to the folklore of the Punjab.

Sobha Singh conceived the idea of painting Sohni at Delhi and it kept on evolving till it became almost a passion with him. He painted her for the first time in 1937 at the same place. In 1947, he left Lahore during riots and could not bring this painting with him. He had kept on painting Sohni consistently till he felt that she had attained a life of her own.

The second painting was started at Andretta in 1947 and was completed there in 1949. On the request of Dr. M.S. Randhawa it was presented to the Royal Air Force (R.A.F.) at Ambala. Although it was completed at Andretta, its final retouching was done at Ambala when Sobha Singh was staying with Randhawa. The RAF took it to Secunderabad. The third painting was done in 1952. Yuvraj Karan Singh paid rupees 4000 for it and took it to his Karan Palace at Srinagar. The rights of printing were retained by Sobha Singh. For the first time, it was printed by the Times of India Press. This is the painting that became very popular and gave instantaneous fame to the artist. This had been reprinted since 1955, by different printers like Times of India Press; Claridge & Co., Bombay; B.N.K. Press, Madras. Vakil and Sons, Bombay, got National Award of Printing for Sohni-Mahiwal.

The artist used different modeling techniques for his third painting. Brother-in-law of Dar ji, about 15 years, visited him at Andretta. The Artist drew the outlines of his cheeks for painting Sohni. He sculpted the bust of Sohni in terra cotta and transferred its outlines to the painting. He wrapped his own body in thin wet muslin cloth and his right leg reflected in mirror became her left leg. He took the face of Mahiwal from the brother of Dr. Bhushan who was a classmate of Dr. Dhanwant Singh Thind. The electric heater with copper reflector gave him the light effect of the setting sun.

A fourth painting was done in 1957 at Andretta. It was again at this place that he painted the fifth one in 1980. Both of these were preserved by Dar ji for his personal gallery. In total he did five paintings of Sohni-Mahiwal, but not two are the

same. He kept improving on them and each painting had its own differences and peculiarities.

When Colonel Tait saw Sohni-Mahiwal in Delhi, he kept looking at it spell-bound for a long time. Yuvraj Karan Singh considered it as his masterpiece par excellence. Dr. Karam Singh Grewal said, "Waris Shah made Heer-Ranjha immortal, and you have given perpetual life to Sohni-Mahiwal. Just as Heer is of Waris Shah, Sohni is of Sobha Singh."

"Sohni-Mahiwal" had been pirated a lot, but Dar ji did not bother. "They copy me," he said, and added, "The lover of art has a keen eye." This painting had been copied on paper, wood, plaster, metal and plastic. Dar ji was confident that nobody could copy him.

Once, he opined, "Mona Lisa with her smile, Venice with her charm, are standing alone waiting for their lovers, so they are not complete and represent half the truth. Sohni-Mahiwal is harmony in union!" Once, a girl said. "I have high opinion for Sohni." Sobha Singh thought for a moment and then seriously replied, "Yes, you are right. She is struggling to create a new society." On painting her, he lifted curtain from this aspect of his painting. The artist gave a new meaning to this old folklore of the Punjab.

Mahiwal, derived spontaneous bliss on seeing her the very first time. He accepted her in totality, without bringing in the conditions of his consciousness. Her response was the same.

### **Noorjahan**

This is the painting of Noorjahan in the court of Guru Hargobind. She is paying her obeisance to the Guru. This is an historical event. When painted, it was considered his masterpiece and it won a great praise.

### **Mumtaz Mahal**

Mumtaz is shown at her last moments and Shah Jahan is holding her hand. She is urging him not to remarry after her death.

### **Kangra Bride**

This is the painting of an innocent girl, sitting in a palanquin with uncertainty and hope in her eyes. Her face shows sadness on leaving the house of her parents. The dove sitting near the bride portrays innocence.



**Swami Ramanand**

The Swami wears orange clothes and he is in a meditative mood. In fact, the artist painted it on some other Swami's request, but he never returned to get it.

**Gorkha Soldier**

This is very impressive painting of a Gorkha soldier. It was painted on the request of a military unit.

**Indira Gandhi**

This is a beautifully made and graceful portrait of the late Prime Minister of India.

**Jawaharlal Nehru**

This is a distinguished portrait of a universal man – handsome and graceful.

**Lal Bahadur Shastri**

Humility of the great man is evident from this portrait.

**Inder Kaur (Wife of Sobha Singh)**

This the only portrait of any of his family members. We can hardly find any photograph of her, as well.

**Self-Portrait**

This is a painting of the artist himself, with brushed back hair and a cream colored shawl. He has a few pockmarks on his face. These got faded with time. This is his only self-portrait.

**Goddess Dawn**

Herein the goddess is sitting on the back of a moving camel passing through darkness and is leaving in her wake a trail of light.

**Maharana Partap**

He is shown as a man of firm resolve who kept on fighting the Moghul imperialism all his life on the principles of freedom and liberty.

**Maharaja Ranjit Singh**

This is an imperial portrait of Maharaja. His one defective eye has been very cleverly painted.

### **Maharaja Duleep Singh**

Herein the prince has been shown standing. It is a very beautiful painting.

### **Painting Material of the Artist**

Sobha Singh used the paints and brushes of Winsor Newton, Romeus (England), sometimes Pelican (German) and rarely of Reeve's brands. The Reeve's material is right especially for the students.

Usually, he used forty shades of the paints. He purchased outdoor tubes, studio tubes or one pound tubes. He experimented with enamels and acrylic paints as well.

"Winsor Newton, or Romays don't make sable brushes of my choice any more. The Indian brushes are good but they don't come under a brand name and so remain unstandardized so far. If the painting material is not good, then perfection does not come and you stop at the craft level only," he remarked. He used transparent varnish for preserving the paintings.

Most of his work is on canvas. Later he replaced it with particleboard. He found lumen paper fixed on hard board as the ideal for painting. When available, he used grain finished (unglazed) artist's sheet for painting. He procured these from England or America. He had to depend on indigenous material when the imported products especially manufactured and standardized for the job were not available.

### **Art Gallery**

Sobha Singh longed for the establishment of an art gallery where one could behold the art, besides visiting the place. He desired the main hall should have entry on one side and exit at its other end.

He stressed, "There should be such an arrangement that the visitors move in a queue keeping some distance from the paintings. Paintings of the Gurus and *avtars* should have a separate section where a visitor should enter with humility and reverence, entering after washing one's feet, covering one's head, and the back of a visitor should not get turned towards a painting."

He desired, "The gallery should also have a library and a museum wing where the originals and the reproductions should be preserved. Every word of any historical document there, should have a microfilmed record."

He explained, "The museum should have the statues and the sculptures of historical nature. The old and new replicas should be preserved. The belongings of the historical figures including the intelligentsia, writers and the artists should be protected."

### **Sikh School of Art**

Sobha Singh had a strong desire that a Sikh School of Fine Arts should be set up by the people. He said, "The Sikh history has a rich and unique heritage of Gurus, saints, thinkers as well as seers, patriots, freedom-fighters, writers, professionals and artists as also the martyrs and reformers. There had been many men and women of distinction who were an asset to the community, society and the mankind." He believed, "This heritage has to be passed on to the coming generations to provide them with their roots. If it is not done, the richness of the Sikh history will get lost forever into oblivion. It has already received a devastating blow by the destruction of the Sikh library and to some extent that of the Central Sikh Museum, both located in the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar. Destruction of the records in the SGPC office, has as well been an irreparable loss, during the wake of the Blue Star Operation in June 1984."

According to him, "The Sikh art should have perspective, besides the lines and flatness which was already present in other schools of art especially that of Kangra. As many aspects of the Sikh history and its characteristics should be brought out as possible."

### **Statues**

Sobha Singh carved statues out of sandstone on the riverbank, as a child. He developed it as one of his in-born skills and got training from nobody. Later in life, even when exclusively devoting time to painting, he made many small statues and a few big ones too, like those of Guru Nanak, M.S. Randhawa, Prithvi Raj Kapoor, Amrita Pritam and Nirmal Chowdhry. Nirmal Chowdhry was a Professor of Philosophy at Hoshiarpur. He was a very reserved fellow. He stayed with the artist for one month. When leaving, he did not meet him and left a message, "Tell Sardar ji that I did not meet him when leaving because we have already met and always did meet."

The statue of M.S. Randhawa decorates the room of the artist. Prithvi Raj's statue has been placed outside on one corner

of the house a little higher up, with a small pool of water under it at ground level. Guru Nanak's statue is in his gallery. One statue has been fixed at the parapet of the kitchen. Golden dawn, worked out on the plaster plaque, is also in his gallery.

### **Writings**

To his credit are some articles and poems. The articles, have mostly a philosophical matrix. *Kalakar* is his well-known poem, and he recited it at a function in England.

## X HONORS

Sobha Singh achieved remarkable distinction in his lifetime. He was eminently famous.

### **Universities**

He received honors from numerous private and official agencies.

**D.Litt. (honoris causa).** Punjabi University, Patiala, conferred on him and gave an honorarium of rupees one thousand per month. When Punjabi University awarded him D. Lit., the Chancellor remarked, "To the portraits, Sobha Singh has given depth to the imagination i.e. a new dimension to them. It is not that the Punjabi University honored him, it is he who has honored the Punjabi University."

**Souvenir.** Guru Nanak Dev University at Amritsar recognised him the same way. In 1973, after the return of the artist from England, Bishan Singh Samundry, Vice-Chancellor, Guru Nanak Dev University, wanted to present him with an Abhinandan Granth (Book of his felicitation) containing his life works and photographs. Dar ji wanted the things done in his own way regarding the quality of the paper, printing and get-up of the volume. The consultations and discussions got so much dragged that the project got fizzled out due to differences of opinions.

In 1987, next year after the death of S. Sobha Singh, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, brought out a souvenir, "Painter of the Divine - Sobha Singh." It was compiled and edited by the well-known scholar Dr. Madanjit Kaur.

It is 274-page volume, in Gurmukhi-Punjabi and English, rich with information about the life, work and philosophy of the renowned artist, and has a good number of pictures. It is very valuable book on Dar ji!

### **Plan for His Museum**

Mr. M.M. Chowdhry, then Governor of Punjab, tried his best to set up a complex with the artist's gallery and residence, near the zoo at Chandigarh on the Ambala Road. Mr. Chowdhry allocated two acres of land there near Chhatbir. The artist did

not like it. The Governor kept sending architect and engineer to Dar ji for his approval of the design. Dar ji made a cardboard model of this, but the plans could not be finalized. Dar ji wanted especially the art gallery to be of a specific type. It was yet to get materialized that the Governor was transferred.

Later, the efforts of Giani Zail Singh, Chief Minister of Punjab, could not mature as well. The location of the building could not be decided upon in time by Dar ji. Giani Zail Singh wanted the undertaking that after the death of Sobha Singh the art gallery with residence of the artist will be converted into a monument under the control of the Punjab Government. It was offered that Gurcharan Kaur would be a paid caretaker of the Museum (Art Gallery), and would stay there. Sobha Singh did not approve of the idea. He felt that the monuments were neglected by the governments.

Sobha Singh had his own doubts. He believed that Gurcharan Kaur who served him devotedly as her own father, deserved everything that belonged to him. He feared that by appointing a trust, it would become a summer resort only.

After 1984 riots, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar, marked out a plot of land on roadside at the village Ranwan near Samrala. Dar ji could not decide about it. In fact, he did not like the idea of moving out of Himachal.

#### **Lalit Kala Academy**

Lalit Kala Academy honored him with a citation, a shawl and a purse of rupees three thousand and one hundred.

#### **State Artist**

The Punjab Government declared him the State Artist and presented him with a shawl and rupees 5,100.

#### **Padam Shri**

In 1984, the title of Padam Shri was conferred upon him for his distinguished work.

#### **Documentary**

The Public Relations Department of Punjab Government made a documentary on him, and it was exhibited throughout the country.

### **Media Coverage**

The Radio and Television covered his numerous interviews. Nearly every leading newspaper and journal started writing about him, deeply appreciating his contribution to the art of painting.

### **Artist of the People**

On 29 November 1976, the birthday of Sobha Singh, an art society at Delhi held an exhibition of his paintings under the patronage of Maharaja Karan Singh, Union Cabinet Minister. With the help of Harbir Singh Bhanwar and Gurcharan Kaur, Dar ji got the paintings arranged according to his own artistic mood. Mrs. Indra Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India, visited the exhibition, congratulated Dar ji, and he was declared "Artist of the People." Dar ji, with flowing white hair and beard, leisurely wrapped in a white Pashmina (special soft wool) shawl, was moving about with grace. He looked a towering personality. Everyone was bowing to him and touching his feet. He was receiving everyone with a slight bow, folded hands, tender love, humility and affectionate smile.

### **Honorary Member Rotary Club**

Sobha Singh accepted the Honorary Membership of the Rotary Club, Batala, District Gurdaspur, Punjab, at a special function. Later, the distinguished Rotarians like W.C. Kwatra, J.S. Nayar, S.P. Marwaha, R.R. Mahajan, Y.N. Goel, A.C. Nagi and others, with their families, visited him with Mrs. and Dr. Kulwant Singh, at Andretta.

### **Recognitions**

The award of Padam Shri was followed by the explosion of functions. Almost every club or society wanted to celebrate this honor with Dar ji as Chief Guest. Dar ji's health did not permit such a rush and he had to apologize for his inability to attend quite a few functions. The artist was honored at Palampur, Amritsar, Chandigarh, Patiala, Bhatinda, Ferozepur, Ludhiana, Jalandhar and at some other places. Almost all dailies and periodicals published his life-sketch and elaborately commended his art. It was a rare recognition and honor to an artist in his own lifetime. Due to his indisposition he could not go to Chandigarh to receive the award from the Government of the Punjab. The Governor of Punjab himself went to Andretta and presented it to him.

## XI AFTER THE ARTIST

### End of An Era

I had left the manuscript of this book with Dar ji for reviewing it and checking the facts and other details in the narrative. He mailed it back to me on 17 July 1986. On 29 July 1986, he wrote to me and asked to get this manuscript typed so that we both could edit it. He added, "All our wisdom gathered in our lives has to be employed in such painful times, otherwise it is useless. He ended his letter with, "Nanak says, fix your mind on the Lord. All that happens is His will." Those were the days of some communal tension after 1984 communal riots. At 1.10 A.M. on 22 August 1986, he left for his heavenly abode.

In the first week of August 1986, he got some breathing trouble. Dr. Shiv Kumar at Palampur was giving him treatment. He was admitted to the Military Hospital, Palampur. On 16 August 1986, the condition became somewhat serious. Sardar Surjit Singh Barnala, Chief Minister of Punjab, sent a medical team from Chandigarh by a helicopter and he was airlifted to the Post Graduate Institute of Medicine, Chandigarh. He became stable and started recovering, though he had become very weak.

On the evening of 20 August 1986, he developed paralysis of his right side. On 21 August 1986, at 10.30 p.m. Hirdaypal Singh told him that the doctors had said that he would be all right. He nodded his head in negative. At 12.45 mid-night he was breathing with great difficulty. At 1.10 A.M. on 22 August 1986, the doctor started his cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and at 1.20 A.M. they declared him dead.

His dead body was taken to the residence of Sardar Harbans Singh Bura at Chandigarh where people paid their last respects to him. The funeral procession started from this very place. He was given a state funeral by the governments of Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Chandigarh Union Territory. The police sounded the last post and gave him a gun-salute. The nation mourned his death and the press gave a very wide coverage to it. Obituaries appeared in almost all the newspapers of the region. The Governor of Punjab said, "This is the end of an era. He was the greatest artist of the time." The President and the Prime Minister of India sent their condolences.

The last rites of Dar ji were held at Gurdwara of Sector-8 in Chandigarh. There was a gathering of about five thousands.



The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar, was represented there. The Governor of Punjab; Chief Minister Punjab, Mr. Surjit Singh Barnala; cabinet ministers; the Punjab ministers, leading politicians, members of parliament, members of legislative assembly; vice-chancellors; university teachers; artists; writers; academicians; other renowned personalities; distinguished people; relatives; friends; admirers; and general public attended the function.

A second function was held in the first week of September 1986, at the residence of the artist at Andretta. There was a gathering of about one thousand, The Vice-Chancellors of some universities, Government officers, politicians, relatives, admirers and general public attended it. Many distinguished personalities paid their tributes to him. The Governor of Himachal Pradesh, Vice Admiral R.K.S. Gandhi said, "The people of Himachal will always remain grateful to Sardar Sobha Singh for bringing this State on the International map of Art." Dr. Bhagat Singh, Vice-Chancellor of Punjabi University, Patiala, declared to open Department of Art in the University and to name one block in the University Complex after Sobha Singh. Sardar Prithipal Singh Kapur, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, represented vice-chancellor. Dr. S.S. Ball of Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, and he declared that from the next academic session "Sardar Sobha Singh Department of Fine Art" will be established in the University.

### **Birthday**

Birthday of Sardar Sobha Singh is celebrated every year on 29 November, at his residence at Andretta. Usually, there is a gathering of about one thousand. The distinguished personalities, Government officers, military personnel, artists, writers, poets, friends, fans and relatives assemble to celebrate the occasion. An on-the-spot oil and water-color painting competition of children is held with prizes and two Running Trophies - one for age group under 12 years, and the other for older children. Sardar Surjit Singh Barnala, Ex-Chief Minister Punjab, and Ex-Governor of Tamil Nadu contributes rupees 1000, every year, towards these prizes.

Recitation of Guru Granth Sahib – the Holy Book of Sikhs, is held. Tea and *Langar* - free lunch, is served. Twenty to twenty five renowned poets gather and recite their poems on nature, art and Dar ji. Scholars present their papers on his life and art.

### **Sobha Singh Memorial Art Society**

The Art lovers, admirers and friends of Dar ji have formed Sobha Singh Memorial Art Society. It is a registered society set up with the sole aim to perpetuate his memory. It plans to institute an Art Prize of the National level, start an Art Magazine, undertake documentation of paintings and the propagation of literary artwork. It wants to establish an Art Library for the general public. Professor Prem Singh, formerly of the Government College of Art, Chandigarh, is its first President, and Mr. Hirdaypal Singh is the General Secretary.

The complex of the Art Gallery of Sobha Singh is taken care of solely by Gurcharan Kaur and Mr. Hirdaypal Singh. The studio-cum-bed room of the artist is maintained in its original form and fresh flowers are arranged there every day. Everything is kept neat, clean and aesthetically arranged. The easel supports the unfinished painting of Bhagat Ravidas. Dar ji became ill when he was painting it and it could not be finished. The Art Gallery has beautifully arranged about 40 paintings by Dar ji.

### **Care of the Complex**

Care of the art gallery complex, including house of the artist, his guests, and visitors, is taken by Mrs. Gurcharan Kaur, her son Mr. Hirdaypal Singh and his wife, as before. Everyone receives the same old warmth. Mr. Shaoki Ram and Mr. Sahlo, Dar ji's personal attendants, still serve there. The common folk, distinguished people, army top brass, leading politicians, high ranking government officers, educationalists, scholars, artists etc. visit this temple of art. Sarpanch Sunika Ram, Mr. Beni Parshad, other dignitaries of Andretta, and his friends from Palampur, adore the place. S. Sobha Singh Artist is the pride of Himachal!

The garden has the same charm. Flowers blossom and terracotta mountain goat sits on the pedestal in the middle of the pool as before. One feels the presence of Dar ji on seeing his wooden sandals. Everything is there as before, but not the picture of the excellence of the painting-art and humility – the Saint-artist!