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| **The murals of DhianpurThe 19th-century murals at Sheesh Mahal and Gaddiwala Dalan depict secular themes, says Kanwarjit Singh Kang** **A**mong the several Vaishnava establishments in Punjab, the most important are those at Pindori Mahantan, Damthal and Dhianpur, all in Gurdaspur district. At Dhianpur, near Batala, is a well-known shrine of Vaishnava bairagis of the Ramanandi sect known by the name of Dera Baba Lalji. According to the Gurdaspur District Gazetter of 1914, “The founder was Baba Lalji, who is said to have lived during the time of Emperor Shahjahan. Dara Shikoh, Shahjahan’s son, had frequent religious disputations with the saint. The doctrine of monotheism was the favourite topic of discussion; so much so, in fact, that Dara Shikoh is said to have adopted his opponent’s views.”

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| The main seat, or gaddi, of the Vaishnava bairagis in Dhianpur, Gurdaspur district**The main seat, or gaddi, of the Vaishnava bairagis in Dhianpur, Gurdaspur district** |

Baba Lalji was born in a khatri family at Kasur, near Lahore. He travelled extensively in northern India and in the spirit of a true bairagi, refrained from settling down at one place. His disciple Dhiandas implored upon him to set up a hermitage. Baba Lalji selected a mound for his recluse and called it Dhianpur after the name of his disciple Dhiandas. Soon Dhianpur flourished into a large village.The dera, comprising a complex of buildings, is located on a considerable high mound, overlooking Dhianpur village. When I visited the dera in 1971, its two enclosures, the Sheesh Mahal and the Gaddiwala Dalan, had no less than 50 murals painted around the mid-19th century.The murals in the Sheesh Mahal depicted diverse themes, both religious and secular. Religious themes were mostly based on epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and the most conspicuous among these was the one that illustrated the battle between Lord Rama and Ravana. There were portraits of the mahants of the dera with their names written in the Gurmukhi script. Guru Nanak Dev sitting under a tree flanked by Bhai Bala and Bhai Mardana were painted in one of the murals. There were portraits of the Sikh royalty and aristocracy, including those of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Maharaja Dalip Singh and Dhian Singh Dogra.Murals in the Gaddiwala Dalan were based exclusively on the religious themes, related mostly to Vaishnava, Shaivism and Shakti themes. Jagannatha with Balabhadra and Subdhara were also painted.

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| A mural panel in Gaddiwala Dalan portraying 14 mahants of the dera with Baba Lalji in the centre**A mural panel in Gaddiwala Dalan portraying 14 mahants of the dera with Baba Lalji in the centre Photos by the writer** |

However, on re-visiting the shrine in 1987, most of the murals were found to have disfigured due to the spray of pesticides by officials of the malaria eradication expedition that left a white mist on the surface of the paintings.A recent visit to the shrine found the murals painted in the 19th century were there no more; these were all scraped off and painted afresh. According to Som Nath Jabalia, the painter of these new murals, a prepared canvas has been first glued to the wall with an adhesive and this canvas surface has then been painted with oil paints.This is an altogether different technique. The traditional painters of murals follow one of the three techniques: tempera, fresco or fresco-secco. In tempera, painting is done on dry wall plaster with pigments made in an organic medium. Fresco implies work done on wet wall plaster with pigments ground in water. In fresco-secco, painting is done on a dry wall with pigments ground in water. In the dera of Baba Lalji, the earlier murals were done in the fresco technique. The newly painted murals cover Hindu religious personalities portraying several rishis, including Vashishtha, Markandeya, Narada, Valmiki and Vyasa Deva. The murals also depict Satyavadi Raja Harishchandra, Ramananda and Tulsidas. A large panel illustrates the battle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Another large panel portrays 14 mahants of the dera with Baba Lalji in the centre. All the mahants bear on their foreheads the distinguishing Vishnu sect mark, the trifala, which consists of three upright lines — the centre one red, and the side ones white. A number of followers of Baba Lalji come from far off places to pay obeisance during the annual fair held here on the birth anniversary of the Baba which usually falls in late January or early February every year.    |