

II/2013

# NISHAAN

NAGAARA



**Koh-i-Noor : The Mountain of Light**

**The Sikh Darbar**

**Guru Nanak in Early Sikh Art**

**Pilgrimage to Chillianwala**

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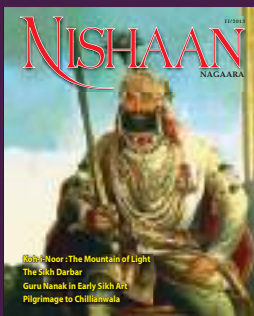
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Maharaja Sher Singh adorned with priceless jewels, including the Koh-i-Noor on his right arm. August Schoefft, circa. 1840s - 1855, Princess Bamba Collection, Lahore Fort.

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## Leaning on Each Other

Many readers know that I discovered the virtues of Sikhism only over the years of living outside India and Punjab. So my views are somewhat skewed and don't always jibe with what passes for the norm.

I understand that whatever the absolute truths that a religion espouses and teaches they are practiced (and come to life) in the culture and the times where they blossom forth. And my cultural bias now is perhaps an odd mixture of Punjabi-Indian and North American; patience is often missing in action.

But I must have been granted a charmed existence. Somehow an interest in Sikhi took root while living in an almost entirely non-Sikh milieu – a miracle wouldn't you agree? That's the only way I see it. And today I find myself writing for and serving on the Editorial Boards of the two premier English language Sikh periodicals published anywhere in the world, the monthly 'Sikh Review' (Kolkata) as well as the quarterly 'Nishaan' (New Delhi). My experience with these two publications has been uniquely satisfying and I must salute two friends who make it possible—the long standing, legendary Saran Singh who has led the 'Sikh Review' for a generation and Pushpinder Singh, the Founder-Executive Editor of 'Nishaan-Nagara'.

Remember that both are published in India and my roots in India are shallow and shaky at best. Both magazines provide great commentaries on Sikhi but they are like of different species – apples and oranges with almost non-existent overlap in their readership. I suppose that speaks well of the large variety of Sikhs that exist and their variegated relationship to Sikhi. The overarching reality is that they are both India-based publications that thrive in the political and cultural ambiance of India that I have been away from for over 53 years – the dominant part of my life. I have little connection there and less feeling for it.

Since Sikhi comes to us from its over 500 years of grounding in Punjab, my writing for India-based periodicals and readers smacks a bit of the age old cliché that dates from the days of the British Raj and speaks of "carrying coals to Newcastle."

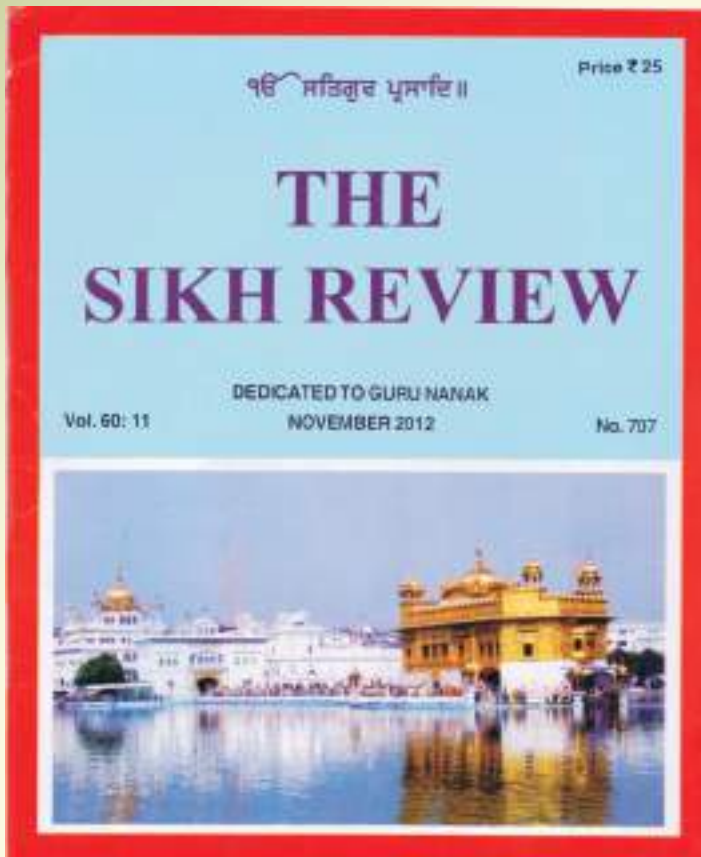
I would be the first to admit that for many years I have been dismissive of Indian cultural attitudes and idiosyncrasies, whether on science, societal ethos and morality or religion. To me their convictions often appear, in the words of the Guru Granth (p 474) as if written in water that have no substance, "*Paani under leek jio(n) jisdaa thaao(n) na thayhu.*"

But my experience with 'The Sikh Review' and 'Nishaan' seems to be working its own merry magic. It is making me more forgiving of human nature and more tolerant, even celebratory, of diversity in Sikhi.

We Sikhs have a longer history in the United Kingdom, East Africa, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore compared to our one hundred years old presence in North America. Living away from India many of us recognise that the overwhelming historical connections to the Hindu culture have seriously influenced and impacted the pristine purity of the Sikh message and practice.

I also argue that we Sikhs need to realise another given: Just as Indian-Hindu culture of India influenced us over the centuries, the Judeo-Christian society in North America and Europe would impact our worldview and practices in the diaspora. Forget not that if Sikhs are a mere drop in the ocean of Hindu society in India; similarly outside India we are an equally small drop in a Judeo-Christian ocean which surely affects our lifestyle and perspective. (Look a bit carefully; it already does).

Just look at the many religions of the world. Christianity presents a very different face in Rome than it does in London, Paris, Cairo or Delhi. I could make similar argument regarding any of the major world religions. It follows then that the diaspora unmistakably will impact and affect Sikh culture, politics and practices; in other words, Sikh communities in Punjab and New York will diverge in fundamental ways, while each holds on to the essentials of the faith. Some divergence is already visible; it will only grow steadily wider with time. Local language, socio-cultural, political and legal realities will continue to define, affect and shape each.



In the foreseeable future I see an evolutionary growth of self-reliant semi-autonomous Sikh communities that dot the globe with an infrastructure that connects them all in a collaborative and interacting whole. In this conglomeration the India-based community will remain the largest, even the most influential, but just one of the global realities of Sikhi's many voices.

As I see it, semi-autonomous means that communities will focus on local issues and local mechanisms to settle their differences and not run to India-based management models or ape their ways.

Look back in history and see: what I am talking about is not so dissimilar from the reality of the twelve Sikh *Misls* that defined our community so meaningfully in the post Guru Period. The *Misls* functioned pretty autonomously and effectively until Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the legendary ruler of Greater Punjab consolidated his powers and successfully undermined possible alternative centers of power in his own domain. (He certainly undermined both the Misl structure and the independent functioning of the Akaal Takht). My take here, therefore, hearkens productively of a 'back to the future' idea.

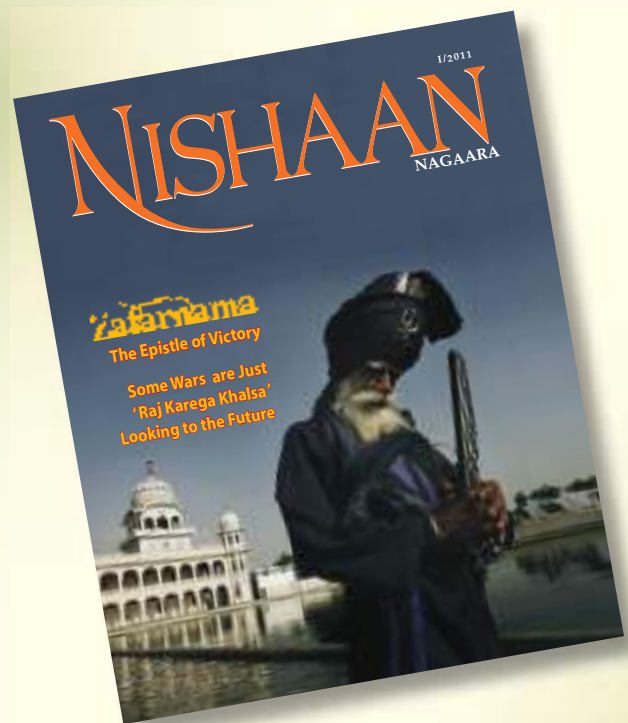
Here then is a shift in focus. Even though I harbour a dismissive cast to many Indian cultural habits, I am not

really working both sides of the street against each other by living in America and writing for India-based publications. It is no longer just "carrying coals to Newcastle" with which I started this conversation today. The idea here is not to overthrow the existing order, never mind how dysfunctional it may appear to many of us, but to regalanise and reorient it. Always keep the fundamentals in mind; they are sacrosanct and not dispensable.

The direction and purpose is to create a collaborative reality which will necessarily be noisy but, at the same time, chock full of the fertility of human ideas.

In today's global world it is more like turning to each other and not turning on each other; not diminishing each other but learning to lean in and lean on each other to create a reality that is greater than the sum of the parts.

And that's how my mind connects more than 50 years of twelve issues a year venerable



monthly 'The Sikh Review' with the fledging quarterly 'Nishaan-Nagaara' that is now just producing its 50<sup>th</sup> issue.

*I am honoured and enhanced by my association with both. It is a gift of grace.*

*Dr I.J. Singh*

# Nishaan-Chardi Kalaa Foundation Joint Initiative

Very much in keeping with the thrust of our Editorial in this issue, we are pleased to announce the joint initiative, nay, a partnership between Nishaan-Nagaara of New Delhi and the California-based Chardi Kalaa Foundation.

Even though Sikhi began in the Punjab over five centuries back, flourishing Sikh communities now exist in just about every country and large city of the world.

This collaboration that we announce is an attempt to formally create structures and mechanisms to celebrate Sikhi's global presence and bridge the inevitable divide that geography creates. In time, many more such initiatives will take their impetus from what we create today.

The key objectives of the Chardi Kalaa Foundation are to promote understanding of Gurbani and core Sikh values, particularly to Sikh youth in America and the diaspora, as well as to non Sikhs, as also to work with and support other Sikh organizations, enhancing Chardi Kalaa of the Sikh community.

In subsequent issues, Nishaan will further apprise its readers of the splendid activities of the Chardi Kalaa Foundation but to begin with, here is this thumbnail note on the Foundation and its Founder-Chairman, Dr. Inder Mohan Singh. He joins the Editorial Board of Nishaan-Nagaara immediately.

Dr. Inder M. Singh is the Chairman of Chardi Kalaa Foundation and has served on the boards of several Sikh non profit organisations including SALDEF, and The Sikh Foundation. He is the Chairman of Lynux Works and was CEO until 2006, founded Excelan, and served as its chairman, CEO and President. He was a co-founder of Kalpana, one of Cisco's early acquisitions. Dr. Singh has served on the boards of several high-tech companies.. He holds Ph.D. and M.Phil. degrees in computer science from Yale University, an MSEE from Polytechnic Institute of New York, and B. Tech (Hons) in Electronics from IIT, Kharagpur, before which he studied at the Doon School in Dehra Dun.

Being an ardent Sikh, and also a science scholar during his formative years, his views on 'Science and Sikhi' uphold the values of Sikhism :

'Science and religion have often been at loggerheads, as illustrated by the persecution of Galileo for declaring that the earth moved around the sun, or the current controversies over evolution and stem cell research. Surrounded by technology, and information



about scientific advances, there is a lot of skepticism about the teachings of religion that ask you to accept things on faith. Younger generations are dropping out of traditional religions in increasing numbers.

Can you be a scientist or technologist and also a devout Sikh without compromising on either? Sri Guru Granth Sahib stresses the importance of deep faith and commitment to the Guru, but at the same time asks us to use our God-given gifts of intelligent discrimination – *bibek budhi* – in the process, and to avoid irrational rituals and superstitions. It specifically raises questions about many widely held beliefs to point out their irrationality. "The Earth is said to be supported by a bull. What a load the bull must bear? But there are countless earths beyond this one – what supports them all?" (Japuji).

The laws of nature are a manifestation of the Divine Hukam, and a source of awe and wonder (*vismaad*). For a Sikh, any new discovery made by science is a celebration of the marvels of God and his creation, an affirmation of His Glory'.

# Koh-i-Noor

## The Mountain of Light

*"Take a strong man. Have him throw a stone northward, another eastward, the third southward, the fourth westward, and the fifth upward, into the air. Fill all the space thus outlined with gold and precious stones but you will still not have achieved the value of the Mountain of Light."*

*This was said by Wafa Begum wife of Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk relating to Fakir Nur-ud-din, the valuation put by her ancestors on the Koh-i-Noor.*



Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Koh-i-Noor set as an armlet.

**T**wo centuries back, Maharaja Ranjit Singh was responsible for retrieving one of the most unique diamonds the world has ever seen – the Koh-i-Noor. The year 2013 is significant one for Sikhs too, for apart from having the distinction of being the only people to move the Afghans out of Punjab and India, they also managed to extricate from them a highly prized treasure. The kudos for this feat rests solely with the

Lion of Punjab - Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Having heard many tales about beauty of the Koh-i-Noor and being a lover of all things beautiful, be it women, horses, gardens, shawls or jewels, the Maharaja coveted this priceless stone and was determined to own it one day. Fortune favoured him and then, quite unexpectedly, an opportunity to do just this came his way. It required cunning, strategy and an army to acquire this invaluable gem but finally, the ruler of Punjab achieved his goal and eagerly took possession of it on 1 June 1813. The account of how he acquired it is as interesting as the history of the Koh-i-Noor itself.

The Koh-i-Noor takes its place in the annals of history as one of the most precious and sought after of gemstones. At one time called *The Babur Diamond* it was recorded by its then owner, the Mughal Emperor Babur found the jewel "so valuable that a judge of diamonds valued it as half the daily expenses of the whole world." This priceless oval shaped gem weighed 186 carats, measured 31.9 millimetres in length and 36 millimetres in

width and was found in the famed but now defunct diamond mines of Kollur, in Golconda, Andhra Pradesh. These mines near Hyderabad produced some of the most fabulous and largest stones the world has seen, including The Great Mughal weighing at 280 carats, the Orlov 189.62 carats, Regent 140.50 carats, Sancy 55.23, Pigot 48.63, Hope 45.52 carats, to name a few, and each has a story behind it that rivals the Koh-i-Noor. All these magnificent stones were known for their purity of colour, clarity and distinctive cut. While cutting, great care was taken to keep the maximum volume of the stone and its shape intact. The main characteristics of Golconda diamonds were that its facets and cullet were specially cut to give the gem a soft glow so that they enhanced the beauty of the wearer and not the other way round.

What makes the Koh-i-Noor so sought after was not only its size and beauty but the fact that its past is linked with so many historical figures and events. Tracing the background of the Koh-i-Noor is not easy; the interlinking of fact with fiction along with contradictions makes it difficult to verify the actual truth. The first reference made to it dates back to 3001 B.C., and originates from the epic Mahabharata, which says that it was worn as a sacred talisman by the legendary warrior Karna, King of Anga. Another lore, with several versions, links it with Lord Krishna. At this time the name given to the diamond was *Syamantaka Mani* meaning prince and leader amongst diamonds. Nothing was heard about the Koh-i-Noor till 1306 when the Raja of Malwa was forced to give it up to the Kakatiya rulers. In 1326, after the Kakatiya Empire fell, it came into the possession of the Delhi Sultan, Muhammad bin Tughluq. There are also several references to Ala-ud-din Khilji being its owner. Some sources maintain that the diamond remained with the Delhi Sultanate till the First Battle of Panipat when Ibrahim Lodi was defeated by Babur in 1526. The Koh-i-Noor now found its way into the founder of the Mughal dynasty's hands. However, the *Babur Nama*, or the memoirs of Babur, records that in 1526, Raja Bikramjit of Gwalior was holding the city of Agra on behalf of Ibrahim Lodi against Mughal onslaught. Humayun on entering the city took prisoners but would not let Agra be plundered. In return, Raja Bikramjit and the city's grateful inhabitants 'presented to him a *peshkash* (tribute) consisting of a quantity of jewels and precious stones, amongst which was one famous diamond which had been acquired by Sultan Ala-ud-din. Humayun, in turn, presented this stone

to his father as his tribute. Meanwhile, Babur was so happy with his victory that he gifted it back to his son. Whatever maybe the true story, the fact remains is that the diamond was passed on to the Mughal Empire and hence forth referred to as *The Babur Diamond*.

Each Mughal Emperor valued the Koh-i-Noor above all other gems in their jewel filled *toshakhana* (treasure house). The diamond is written about in Emperor Akbar's memoirs, the *Akbar Nama* in superlatives and as "being above valuation." For a while it was set in the famous bejewelled Peacock throne by the Emperor Shah Jahan. Inherited by each Mughal ruler in turn, it remained in their possession until the reign of Muhammad Shah *Rangila* (the Colourful). Delhi, the weakened capital of the Mughal Empire was captured in 1739 and ransacked by Nadir Shah from Persia. Legend has it that Nadir Shah seized the vast collection of jewels from the treasury including the Peacock Throne but could not locate the Koh-i-Noor. Muhammad Shah, hoping to save the legendary diamond that had been in his family for centuries, cleverly concealed it on his person, in fact in his turban. This ploy worked for a while but eventually, a woman from the Mughal harem hoping to seek favour with the new conqueror secretly disclosed the location of the hidden jewel. After devising ways of abstracting the diamond from his prisoner, Nadir Shah, with a great show of diplomacy and camaraderie, invited Muhammad Shah to a magnificent banquet. After the feasting had reached its peak, the victor suggested they cement their new friendship and brotherhood by an exchange of turbans. The helpless Mughal Emperor could not do anything but unhappily comply. Nadir Shah was completely bedazzled by the brilliance of this large sparkling diamond and is said to have exclaimed "Koh-i-Noor!", meaning Mountain of Light. Appropriately named, it is till today known by this name.

The Koh-i-Noor now left its native soil for the first time and after transiting through tumultuous times and various Persian owners, passed into the hands of Ahmed Shah Abdali of Afghanistan. The history of the Durrani descendants is a bloody one, causing one to recall the curse of the Koh-i-Noor which dates back to 1306. A Hindu text of that time declared "He who owns this diamond will own the world, but will also know all its misfortunes. Only God, or a woman, can wear it with impunity." The



*Painting of Maharaja Ranjit Singh seen wearing the Koh-i-Noor on his right arm*

curse certainly proved true; looking back at its chequered career the diamond is accompanied by greed, war, blood and treachery, bringing out all the basest of traits possible in the human psyche. Ahmed Shah was succeeded by his son Taimur Shah and then his grandson Zaman Shah. The latter was unable to hold onto the throne and was defeated and deposed by his brother Muhammad Shah at Ghazni. Fleeing to Khaibar with a few valuables including the Koh-i-Noor, the blinded Zaman Shah hid the diamond in walls of the fort at Ashik. The youngest brother Shah Shuja managed to raise a body of troops and established himself on the Afghan throne. It was to him that Zaman Shah revealed the hiding place of the diamond; it was then dug out and handed over to him. Unable to sustain his hold on the throne, Shah Shuja fled to northern India in 1811, carrying the Koh-i-Noor with him.

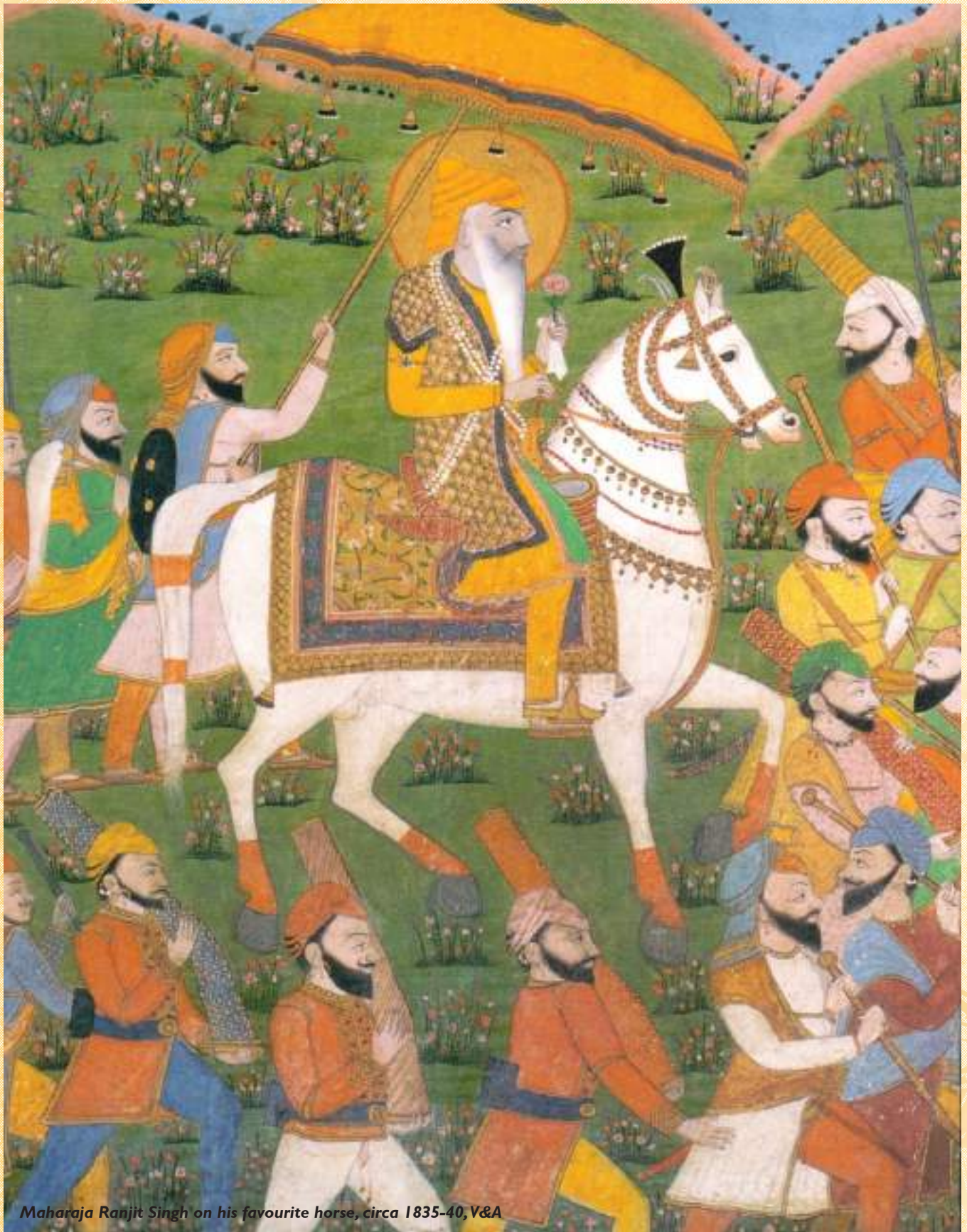
Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk arrived at Attock as a guest of the Afghan Governor Jahan Dad Khan. However, on finding Shah in touch with his old enemy Wazir Fateh Khan (Muhammad Shah's minister), the Governor had him manacled and sent to Kashmir. His brother Ata Mohammad Khan was the Governor of Kashmir and he made Shah Shuja his prisoner and kept him under close guard.

In the meantime, Shah Shuja's wife Wafa Begum reached Lahore, hiding the famous diamond on her person. Fearing for her husband's life, she begged Maharaja Ranjit Singh for his help, promising him the Koh-i-Noor in exchange for her spouse's safe return. The Maharaja reassured her and had her suitably lodged and entertained while he planned his strategy. Things began falling in place for him when Wazir Fateh Khan who had become powerful in Afghanistan, approached him. He asked for his assistance in overthrowing Ata Mohammad Khan and capturing Kashmir. Seizing this opportunity, Maharaja Ranjit Singh with his own plans for Kashmir in mind, sent a force there with strict instructions to bring back Shah Shuja at all cost. The Kashmir expedition was led by the competent Diwan Mohkam Chand, assisted by the Governor of Jammu, Desa Singh Majithia, Nihal Singh Attariwalla and Jodh Singh Kalsia, while the Maharaja



*Seal ring of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, 1869/AD 1812-13. Carved emerald set in gold, 2.2 x 1.4 cm. Kapany Collection.*





Maharaja Ranjit Singh on his favourite horse, circa 1835-40, V&A



himself camped at Rohtas with other generals in readiness. The joint Sikh and Afghan forces captured Shergarh Fort and while the Wazir's men looted the treasury, Mohkam Chand searched for Shah Shuja.

Finding him fettered and in a pitiful state, he wasted no time in releasing him and setting forth to Lahore.

Escorted by Kanwar Kharak Singh, Shah Shuja entered Lahore amidst great pomp and show. He became a pensioner of the Lahore Durbar but was treated with great respect and housed at Mubarak Haveli along with his wife and retinue. Shortly thereafter, the Maharaja sent some of his trusted nobles to the deposed Afghan ruler to retrieve the promised Koh-i-Noor but it was not forthcoming. Numerous excuses were made; Shah Shuja sent a deputation to the Maharaja declaring that the diamond was mortgaged for six crore rupees at Kabul. He also declared that if he were to be given three lac rupees and an annual income of fifty thousand rupees he would give up the diamond within fifty days. Diwan Moti Ram, Fakir Azizuddin and others were then "sent to get the diamond but the Shah 'sent by their hands a large *pookraj* (topaz) of a yellow colour which the Shah stated to be the Koh-i-noor." The Maharaja sent for



Ranjit Singh's Horse and Jewels, after Emily Eden 1844. Hand-tinted lithograph, 22 x 17.5 cm. Kapany Collection.

his jewellers and had the stone examined; obviously it was declared not to be the 'Mountain of Light'. The Maharaja kept the large topaz, but by now quite angry with the excuses and deception, ordered that the Shah and family be put under restraint. He also instructed that the Shah and his family would not be allowed any food or drink till the promised stone was given up. This situation lasted about eight hours, after which a very humble message was sent to the Maharaja to retrieve the Koh-i-Noor.

'On the 29<sup>th</sup> Jamadi-ul-awal, (1 June 1813,) the Maharaja on hearing this, cheerfully mounted his horse, and accompanied by troops on

right and left, and taking with him a sum of 1,000 rupees in cash, went to Shah Shuja's haweli. The Shah received him with great respect and bended the knee to him. The Maharaja sat down, the Shah produced the diamond and gave it to the Maharaja, who signed an agreement to secure the Shah from further molestation. Presents were then exchanged and Maharaja Ranjit Singh returned to Lahore fort with the incomparable Koh-i-Noor.

The Koh-i-Noor was the first jewel Maharaja Ranjit Singh coveted and had to have at any cost, the only jewel he enjoyed wearing on ceremonial occasions as it was his prized possession. When the Maharaja received the diamond it was set in an armband. After wearing it in this fashion for about three years, he turned it into a *sirpesh* or turban ornament with a diamond drop weighing about a *tolah* (eleven grams). Later, the Koh-i-Noor was reset in a *bazuband* or armband once again, only this time it was set with two large diamonds on either side. The stones once belonging to Shah Shuja were bought at Amritsar and cost the Maharaja 100,000 and 130,000 rupees respectively. All three diamonds were enclosed in a beautiful gold casing intricately decorated with white, red and green enamel. The main casing itself was shaped like an open lotus flower, with the side ones being leaf shaped. Though at first glance it looked as if the diamonds were bezel set, actually delicate prongs secured the stones. To complete this stunning ornament, rich burgundy cords were attached to the armband from which hung tassels of lustrous natural pearls



Ranjit Singh with Hira Singh, (Kapany Collection)

and rubies. The Maharaja enjoyed showing this breathtaking piece of jewellery to special guests who visited the Lahore court. He was thrilled to find them gaze in amazement at this wondrous stone, noting its beauty and fire. Truly a one of a kind piece, it was kept in a crimson-lined, velvet box at the Moti Masjid *toshakhana* or treasury.

The end came too soon for the Lion of Punjab; while he was lying sick in bed just before he passed away in June 1839, he told his assembled ministers that he would like to gift the Koh-i-Noor to the Jagannath Puri temple in Orissa. There is some mention that he wanted to give the diamond to the Harmandir Sahib at Amritsar. However he did ask for it to be brought



Reverse view: original setting for the Koh-i-Noor diamond, Lahore, c.1818. Enamelled gold, 10 x 15cm, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's collection.



*The recut Koh-i-Noor as set in the crown of the British Sovereign (truly 'Jewel in the Crown')*

to him so he could throw holy water on it, signifying that he had made the behest. Pretending to send for the Koh-i-Noor, his ministers lied to him by saying it was not at Lahore but in the royal treasury at Amritsar. They felt it should be kept at Lahore and passed on to Kanwar Kharak Singh who was the Maharaja's eldest son and heir.

The Koh-i-Noor remained at the Lahore Durbar treasury and was worn by Maharaja Ranjit Singh's successors, Kharak Singh, Sher Singh and Dalip Singh, in turn. The legend goes that whosoever owns the diamond rules the kingdom; this still holds true, even today, as we can see. After annexation of the Punjab, this prized stone came under tremendous scrutiny, the major objective being to transport it to England as soon as possible and present it to the Queen. Quite a feather in the cap for the East India Company! Lengthy discussions took place on how exactly it should be presented and by whom. Finally it was decided that the young Dalip Singh as the successor to Maharaja Ranjit Singh would do the honours. In 1851, the 13-year-old ex-Maharaja of Punjab was taken from his native

land to England and made to hand over this prized heirloom that had been in his family for decades. The Koh-i-Noor was put on display that very same year at the Great Exhibition in London, where it was the highlight of the exposition. Apparently, Queen Victoria's consort Prince Albert was disappointed with the appearance of the stone and in 1852 ordered it to be recut. For centuries the unusual cut of the Golconda's distinguished it from other diamonds. Appearing like any other large commercial diamond, now this unique 186 carat jewel retained none its natural characteristics nor shape, as it was drastically reduced to a mere 105 carats; losing 42 per cent of its weight. It was first worn by the Queen as a brooch but later set as the centre piece of the royal crown.

The story of the Koh-i-Noor would have taken a dramatic turn if Maharaja Ranjit Singh's dying wish were carried out. The diamond would not have been a part of the Lahore treasury but kept safely at the Jagannath Puri temple. Any power, foreign or otherwise would have found it impossible to remove it from there. We can however celebrate the fact that over



*The Koh-i-Noor displayed at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851.*



two hundred years ago, a young, diminutive, one-eyed, uneducated man, carved out an Empire for the Sikhs. Also, two hundred years ago, on the 1<sup>st</sup> June of 1813, Maharaja Ranjit Singh accomplished the inconceivable; to get back to this country one of its most prized treasures - The Koh-i-Noor.

*Jyoti M Rai  
Jewellery Designer and Numismatist*



*The classic portrait of Maharaja Dalip Singh.  
FX Winterhalter, 1854, The Royal Collection ©  
Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.*



*The Battle of Sohraon Febuary 1846: watercolour by an artist of the Punjab School, © 1846.*

# The Koh-I-Noor and a Tale of Betrayal

**I**n a well known national newspaper, there appeared a prominently-placed interview with one Rajib Kumar Singh of Calcutta who claimed descendency from Raja Lal Singh, the last prime minister of the Lahore Durbar under the Sikhs and the “right-hand man” of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, *Lion of the Punjab*. By virtue of this connection, Rajiv Kumar claimed that some of the prized jewels (including the legendary Koh-i-Noor) which were smuggled out

by the British after the Anglo-Sikh Wars, were his ! So, what are the facts ?

History has recorded there has rarely been as ignominious a pair of traitors as the Dogras Lal Singh and Tej Singh who blatantly betrayed the Kingdom which they had ostensibly sworn to serve and whose salt they had eaten. All this is well documented in various historical records and it is perhaps pertinent to quote extracts from a recent book by an American

writer, I.G. Edmonds, published in New York, with a chapter on the fall of the Sikh Kingdom:

"So it happened that the Sikh army stormed across the Sutlej on 11 December 1845, with their commander-in-chief and prime minister secretly betraying them to the enemy. Both traitors, Lal Singh and Tej Singh, had been among the soldiers who had stood just before the attack, at the tomb of Ranjit Singh to vow fidelity in the battle to the spirit of the Old Lion. General Sir John Littler's forces at Ferozepore were pitifully undermanned. Lal Singh knew this and, instead of attacking here as he should have, he ordered his army to bypass Ferozepore. The reason he gave was that it was senseless to waste time on the smaller garrisons when they could strike the full British force instead."

"Following this poor advice, the Sikhs charged ahead into British India. Sir Hugh Gough, accompanied by Governor-General Hardinge, came rushing with his main British army to meet the threat. On 17 December, 1845 the British straggled into Mudki, a Punjab village on the road to Ferozepore that had been abandoned by the Punjabis. The British made camp to rest after a fatiguing march. Supper was just starting when a messenger brought the news that the Sikhs were preparing an attack. Gough hastily rallied his troops, charging out to meet the Sikhs who had gone into some sand hills covered with scrub bush. The battle became a melee that raged for two hours from sunset to twilight, until darkness made it impossible for the mixed-up force to tell friend and foe.

Hardinge, as Governor-General, was extremely dissatisfied with the showing made by his army. Many of the Sepoys (native troops) had turned and run, some even firing into the rear of their own troops ahead of them. The Sikhs pulled back to Ferozeshah, six miles from Ferozepore and General Gough ordered an immediate attack, but Hardinge used his authority as civil Governor-General to countermand the commander-in-chief's order. Interference with a field commander in battle by a civilian authority was something unheard of in the British army. Nevertheless, Hardinge refused to permit the attack until General Littler had brought up reinforcements from the by-passed garrison at Ferozepore. The battle of Ferozeshah on 21 December 1845 was one of the bloodiest of all engagements by the British in India."

"As at Mudki, the battle started in the late afternoon and extended into the night. Again, confusion reigned, even so, the fighting was heroic on both sides. The British had about 5,000 European and 12,000 Native troops. They repeatedly stormed the Sikhs' emplacements in frontal attacks, only to be beaten back each time. The situation became so desperate that Governor General Hardinge was sure that the battle was lost. Accordingly, he tried to save the thing he loved most – his sword. It had belonged to Napoleon and was given to Hardinge by the Duke of Wellington in 1816."

"The British finally took the Sikh emplacements, but were immediately driven back by a savage counterattack. The fighting then halted so that the exhausted soldiers on each side could get some rest."

Later, Hardinge wrote to Sir Robert Peel:

"The night of the 21st was the most extraordinary of my life. I bivouacked with the men, without food or covering, and our nights were bitter cold. A burning camp in our front, our brave fellows lying down under a heavy cannonade, which continued during the whole night...I remained until morning, taking very short intervals of rest...my answer to every man was that we must fight it out, attack the enemy vigorously at daybreak, beat him, or die honourably in the field".

"Gough and Hardinge were well aware that defeat now could unleash revolt throughout India and destroy the Empire, and so mounted a desperate attack that drove back the bitterly fighting Sikhs across the Sutlej River. British casualties totaled 2,451. Sikh losses were probably about the same."

"Late in the afternoon of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, a fresh Sikh army appeared, personally led by Tej Singh. What happened, then, is still the subject of controversy.

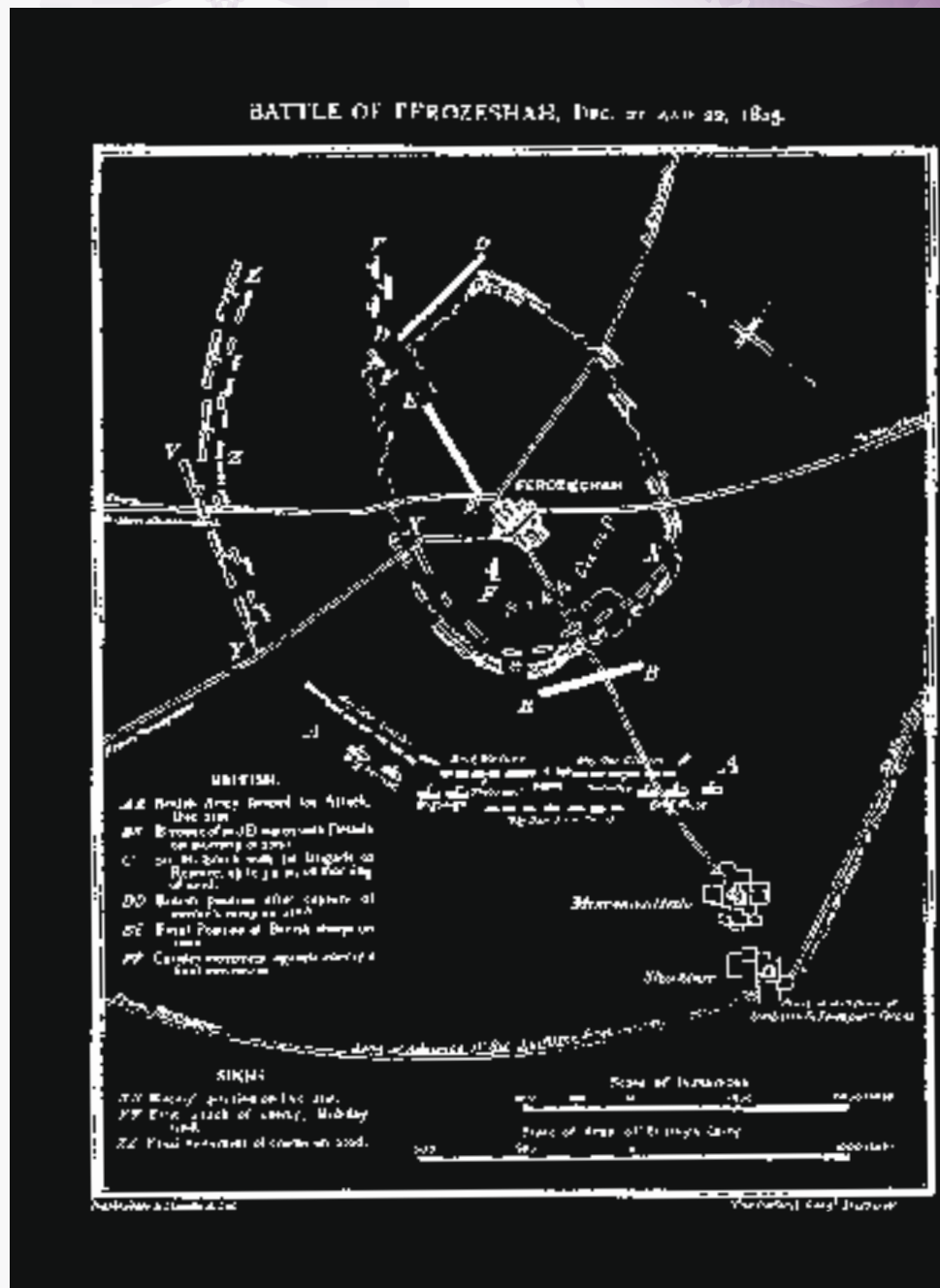
According to Jagmohan Mahajan's *Circumstances Leading to the Annexation of the Punjab*: As the day advanced a second wing of the Sikh army commanded by Tej Singh appeared and the wearied and famished English saw before them a desperate and, perhaps, useless struggle. But this force then mysteriously withdrew from the battle-field at a moment when the artillery ammunition of the English had failed, when a portion of their force was retiring from Ferozepore, and when no exertions would have saved the remainder if the Sikhs had boldly pressed forward. *The Sikh cause was doomed with traitors in command*".



Although some have tried to excuse Tej Singh's actions, it appears clear that he was determined to see his own Sikh Army destroyed in order to break the power it had. He kept making a pretence of fighting, but used every excuse to avoid battle and to secretly inform the British command of Sikh plans, when he could not hold back his troops. In view of his and Lal Singh's conduct, the stout defence put up by Sikhs at Ferozeshah was nothing short of remarkable. Ferozeshah was a victory for the British, but it was a very hard won one, albeit with treason as their ally.

"On 21 January 1846, the British took a severe beating, losing an important camel baggage train. Then, on 18 January, Sir Harry Smith stopped a Sikh attack at Aliwal and drove the Sikhs back across the Sutlej River. The Sikh regrouped, and the decisive battle of the First Sikh War was fought at Ferozeshah, a mud-hut village on the British side of the Sutlej. Two days before the battle, Lal Singh had secretly sent a messenger to the British with a map of the Sikh entrenchments to guide the attack by Gough. Later, the British, evidently conscience-stricken for having dealt with this traitor, claimed that "this information came too late to be of any other use than as confirming the intelligence we already had", as an official report put it".

"At the height of the battle, the Sikhs began to retreat in



order to re-group for a new attack. They had to re-group for a new attack. They had constructed a bridge of boats across the Sutlej to provide an avenue of escape, should the battle turn against them. But when they started across, they found that Tej Singh had sunk the centre boat.

According to Jagmohan Mahajan : "Thrust back inch-by-inch, the Sikhs were hurled pell-mell into the river, into which they plunged, preferring death to surrender. Then followed a hateful scene of British hatchery: nearly ten thousand of the enemy were shot down by grape and shrapnel in the bed of the river which ran red with blood". (*The statement in quotes is from J.B. Cunningham who wrote the History of the Sikhs in 1847*).



Sketch of Dalip Singh, F.X. Winterhalter, July 1854. Watercolour, 21 x 17.2 cm Lent by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. The Royal Collection Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II (13342).

There have been bigger and bloodier battles in military history, but none have been fought with greater bravery on both sides. No one recognised this more than Sir Hugh Gough. While giving full credit to his own troops for their truly heroic charges, Gough did not neglect to praise the gallant enemy.

In a letter to Sir Robert Peel, Gough wrote: "Policy precludes me from publicly recording my sentiments on the splendid gallantry of our fallen foe, or to record the acts of heroism displayed, not only individually, but almost collectively by the Sikh officers and army and I declare, were it not from a deep conviction that my country's good required the sacrifice, *I could have wept to have witnessed the fearful slaughter of so devoted a body of men*" (emphasis Editor).

Sobraon had destroyed the main Sikh Army. However, smaller Sikh armies were still intact at Peshawar and Amritsar. Hardinge decided that his

battered forces lacked the strength to hold the Punjab. He was content to annex only that part on the east bank of the Sutlej River.

He also took Kashmir, the magnificently beautiful region between the Punjab and the Himalaya Mountains. He knew that the British could not hold the rebellious Kashmir Valley against the vengeful Punjabi guerrillas who were sure to form.

So he sold Kashmir to Gulab Singh, the Rajah of Jammu, a small state bordering the Punjab and Kashmir. Gulab Singh had been sympathetic to the British. Hardinge then affirmed Dalip Singh as Maharaja of the Punjab and his mother, the Rani, as regent. The traitors Lal Singh and Tej Singh retained their positions, but the resultant treaty had made the Punjab a British dependency.

### Kashmir "sold" to the Traitors

The British policy of trying to control Punjab through a puppet Government had got off to a bad start. The people of Kashmir took unkindly to being "sold" to the Sultan of Jammu. The British discovered that Lal Singh, their supposed friend, was now inciting the Kashmiris to resist being taken from the Punjab and given to Gulab Singh of Jammu. Lal Singh was tried and exiled. The Sikhs, who hated their prime minister for his treacherously helping the British overrun the Punjab, were pleased by this ouster.

Rani Jindan was completely deprived of all power, although, as mother of the ten-year-old Maharaja Dalip Singh, she still held the title of Regent. Then, in February 1847, Hardinge learned that the Rani was conspiring with some old retainers of the late Ranjit Singh to assassinate the British resident agent and Tej Singh, whom the queen blamed for her fall from power. Unfortunately for Hardinge, the evidence against the queen was so slight that he did not care to risk arousing Sikh sympathy for her by taking action. Thus, he decided to wait for a better chance.

That opportunity came shortly afterward, when the British planned to award those chiefs who had assisted them. These awards were to be presented by the ten-year-old Maharaja Dalip Singh at a colourful durbar. When Tej Singh came forward to receive elevation to a rajahship, the boy refused to mark the traitor's forehead with the saffron *teeka* of office. Henry Lawrence, the British resident, later wrote: "I thought it might be bashfulness, or a dislike to

wet his finger in the saffron paste, but when I pressed the point in vain ... His Highness folded his arms and shrunk back into his velvet chair, with a determination foreign to his age and gentle disposition”.

After the second Anglo-Sikh War, and the fateful battle of Chilianwallah in 1849, Lord Dalhousie called a durbar in Lahore. Here, in a magnificent display of pomp, his representative, Henry Elliott, read a proclamation: “Wherefore the Governor-General of India has declared and hereby proclaims that the Kingdom of the Punjab is at an end and that all the territories of Maharaja Dalip Singh are now and henceforth a portion of the British Empire in India”. Dalhousie also charged the Sikhs a heavy indemnity and forced the Government to give the famous Koh-i-Noor diamond to the British collection of crown jewels.”

The Sikh Empire was ended. The British Raj now extended from the Afghanistan border in the west to the Bay of Bengal in the east, and from the Himalaya mountains in the north to Cape Comorin at the tip of the subcontinent in the South.

Do the present day heirs of the traitor Lal Singh still want to claim those crown jewels ?

*Pushpindar Singh*  
[from *The Sikh Review*]



*Gulab Singh, who bought Jammu & Kashmir from the British using funds 'looted' from the Toshkhana at Lahore.*



*View of Jammu city and the River Tawi today.*

# THE JEWEL CHASE



*Buckingham Palace, London*

**T**he recent move of the British government to display a replica of the original uncut Kohinoor, as it was taken from its last Indian owner Maharaja Dalip Singh, in the Natural History Museum in London, again brings back controversies surrounding this historic treasure.

In 1852, the British re-faceted the 181-carat Kohinoor to 106 carats. According to one historian, replicas in themselves need not worry us, for there are a number of replicas of the Kohinoor all over the world. These duplicates are made by the Diamond Trading Corporation. It has made copies of 51 world-famous gems, with unrivalled precision, using laser technology. It is unthinkable to have a major display of diamond replicas, without bringing

in the Kohinoor. In fact, in India too one has seen such exhibits. In the former summer palace-museum of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Rambagh Gardens at Amritsar, there is a copy of this famous diamond.

The question before us is whether there is any chance of India getting back the diamond. Here, it is necessary to know that Pakistan feels that it has a greater right over the diamond than India, as it was taken from the minor Maharaja Dalip Singh who ruled from Lahore in 1839. In fact, the British are cashing in on this controversy to ensure that the diamond is not returned to the subcontinent. In June 2000, as stated by the Rajya Sabha member Kuldeep Nayar, the British High Commission in India had expressed its ambiguity over the ownership of the diamond.

Most importantly, it said it wasn't sure whether the Kohinoor rightfully belonged to India. One spokesman of the British government pointed out that the Kohinoor had been in the possession of Mughal rulers in Delhi for 213 years, with rulers in Kandahar and Kabul for 66 years and with the British for 155 years.

Kept at the Tower of London, the Kohinoor is set in the Maltese Cross of the coronation crown made for the Queen Elizabeth (late Queen Mother) in 1937. The Kohinoor (106 carats) is valued much higher than any other diamond equal in quality and size and there is no chance of it being sold by the British. According to gemologists, its reserve price, if sold in an international auction could be as high as \$10 million. A few years ago, the 69 carat Taylor Burton diamond (smaller than the Kohinoor) was sold for \$3 million, whereas the 137 carat Premier Rose diamond (larger than the Kohinoor) was sold for more than \$10 million.

A few years ago, the famous betting firm of Ladbrookes in London declared that the bets were 1:00 against the diamond going back to the subcontinent. The odds came down 1:50 if India and Pakistan were to jointly demand it from Britain.

Then again, in case a joint demand is made by India and Pakistan and the British concedes it, where will the diamond be kept? As per international conventions, it has to be on display six months in Pakistan. The security requirements would require a lot of expense. And, it would be impossible to cover the cost with the entrance fee charged from the visitors. We have also not been able to keep the Nizam's jewels – our national treasure – on permanent display, due to the cost involved in providing adequate security.

Another part of the problem is that within India there are many claimants to the treasure and they are prepared to go to court for it. In 2002, the Jagannath temple in Puri had staked its claim on the Kohinoor, stating that prior to Dalip Singh taking possession of the diamond, it was the temple's property. Its lawyers claim that they have documentary proof that Maharaja Ranjit Singh had bequeathed the diamond to the temple before his death in 1839. For this, the temple lawyers quote from a letter preserved in the National Archives of India. This letter was written by the British Political Agent to Ranjit Singh's Court (2 July 1839) and addressed to T.A. Maddock, the officiating

Secretary to the Government of India. It says: "During the last days of his illness, Ranjit Singh is declared to have bestowed to charity jewels and other property to the supposed value of 50 lakh. Among the jewels, he directed the well-known Kohinoor diamond to be sent to the temple of Jagannath."

In 2001, Kunwar Meet Pal Singh, who claimed to be one of the Maharaja Dalip Singh's direct descendants, stated that his family had received a letter from the Secretariat of Queen Elizabeth II. The letter signed by Deborah Bean, the Queen's chief correspondence officer, stated, "The Queen has taken notice of their earlier comments on their royal legacy and other articles, including the Kohinoor diamond." Bean had apparently written that she had been instructed to send Singh's letter to UK Foreign Secretary Robin Cook "so that he may know of your approach to Her Majesty on this matter and may consider the points you raise."

Other individuals have surfaced both in Britain and in India, staking their claim to the diamond. They claim they are descendants of Dalip Singh. Beant Singh Sandhanwalia staked a claim saying he was a descendant of Duleep Singh's cousin. And William D. Forbes, a retired Scottish surgeon who migrated to Canada 40 years ago, has recently said that he is the heir to the priceless jewel. He claims to be the great-grandson of Maharaja Dalip Singh.

And so it goes.

*K.R.N. Swamy*



*Britain's Queen Elizabeth II : Note the 'Jewel in the Crown'*

# 'I don't think India will ever get the Kohinoor'

Someone from amongst us, off and on, will continue to ask the British for its return. It is ours but I do not think India will ever get back the Kohinoor. At the common level, it is an emotional problem. Lord Dalhousie took it from Dalip Singh, the eight-year-old son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. It was explained that it was part of reparation which the British exacted after defeating the Sikhs in Punjab. This still is the British case and it considers the booty from the days of the Raj as legitimate.

The Kohinoor is not the only relic the British government forcibly retains. It has kept back books, documents, papers, pictures, posters and paintings of the Raj and of our struggle for Independence. The British have taken advantage of the differences between India and Pakistan over the division of the material and distributed it among various museums in the UK. It looks as if India has more or less accepted the appropriation of the entire material by the British government.

I raised the question of the Kohinoor's return when I was India's High Commissioner to the UK in 1990. A couple of newspapers in London published my statement that the Kohinoor belonged to India and that we must get it back because we were the rightful owners. During my short stint in the UK, I found that the British would be embarrassed whenever I talked to them about the Kohinoor. When I visited the Tower of London with my family to see Indian diamonds, including the Kohinoor, British officials, who showed us around, were very apologetic. They said: "We feel ashamed to show them (diamonds) because they are from your country." I recall the remark which our old servant, Murli, made after seeing the diamonds: "We must take back the Kohinoor when we return to India." His words reflected the popular Indian opinion.

I did not stay long enough in London to pursue the claim over the Kohinoor. But when I was nominated to the Rajya Sabha, 1997-2003, I took up the matter in the House as well as with the government. I got a petition signed by some 50 MPs – then Opposition leader Manmohan Singh was one of them – to request the Government of India to ask the British government to return the Kohinoor. Jaswant Singh, then Foreign Minister, assured me that the government would take

up the matter with London forthwith. I presumed that he had done so.

After some months I asked a question in the House: "What was the progress on return of the Kohinoor to India?" Jaswant Singh's reply was that the government had taken up the matter with the UK through the Indian High Commission at London. To my horror, I found during a visit to London that it was not true. The Indian High Commission had no knowledge of any step New Delhi had taken, if it all. Apparently, the government was procrastinating and not coming out with the facts.



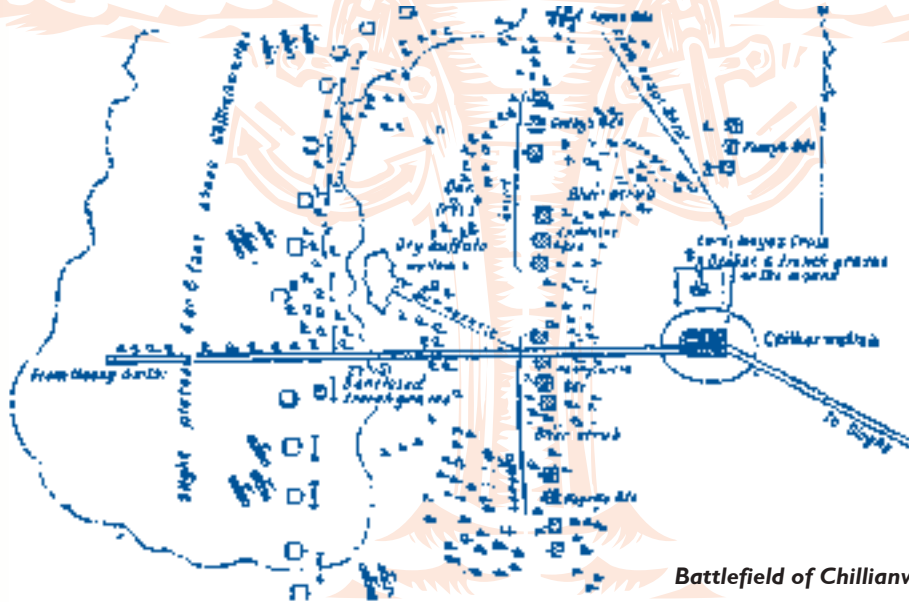
*Nishaan Sahib outside the Indian High Commission in London*

I would remind Jaswant Singh of the Kohinoor at practically every session but his reply would be merely a gentle smile. Once when I talked to him about the return of the Kohinoor, he was cold. But he was frank. He told me that by raising the issue of the Kohinoor, India would be unnecessarily spoiling relations with the UK. It was a revelation to me. I would have brought the issue before the Rajya Sabha but then it was near the end of my tenure.

What hurt me was a remark by a British official in Delhi at a party some time later: "Mr Nayar, the Kohinoor does not belong to India. If ever things come to such a pass when we have to return it, we would rather give it to Pakistan." I said in reply: "By all means, do so. The Kohinoor would at least return to the Indian subcontinent."

*Kuldip Nayar  
Former Indian High Commissioner in the U.K.*

# A Pilgrimage To Chillianwala



**Battlefield of Chillianwala, 13 January 1849.**

**D**uring my earlier visit to Pakistan in March 2007, I had not managed to visit Chillianwala, the site of a famous battle during the Second Anglo-Sikh War in January 1849.

Sikh forces had given a heroic account of themselves at Chillianwala, inflicting heavy casualties on the British and their Indian cohorts. Contemporary accounts, even from British chroniclers, mention the valour displayed there by Sikh troops. Sikh gunners stayed with their guns to the last man and did not retire. They died fighting next to their artillery pieces.

What a refreshing change from what we see in contemporary Sikh society today !

I live in Switzerland where we Sikhs are a microscopic minority. This confers the role of community ambassadors on each one of us. We face increasing harassment at airports in Europe, rising xenophobia and racism in a Europe still reluctant to accept its decline in world affairs.

Being nevertheless a loyal Swiss citizen, I feel the occasional need to recharge my spiritual batteries by visiting places associated with the physical presence of my role models from Sikh history.

In 2007, I had visited Naushera in Pakistan where Akali Phoola Singh had fallen in battle. I had also visited Jamrud on the North-West frontier where General Hari Singh Nalwa had attained martyrdom. I had felt an

intense spiritual regeneration at both these places, thinking of both these heroes and doing ardaas for our Panth.

Time constraints had prevented me from visiting Chillianwala during this visit. I was feeling an increasing need to renew my lien with my past as a Sikh by visiting it.

Waheguru Almighty has blessed me and fulfilled my wish: I was able to visit Chillianwala on 30 September 2011.

Such visits provide me with a much needed break from what I see in modern day Sikh society: leaders motivated more by considerations of personal aggrandisement than service to the Sikh Panth; youngsters in Punjab with their brains addled by drugs and alcohol; people flocking to deras and charlatans masquerading as gurus, ignoring the sublime message of the Guru Granth Sahib; people seeking instant salvation through gimmicks and shortcuts rather than unrelenting dedication to Gurbani's message; Sikh society riddled by casteism, arrogance, crass materialism and female infanticide. Yet, my faith in Sikhism and the Gurus' teachings remains unshakeable.

However, it does occasionally require me to be physically present at sites associated with the lives of our Gurus and deeds of our heroes. I go to such places to bathe in the past presence of my role models.

I accompanied a close personal friend, a renowned Swiss barrister who is a former member of the Swiss Parliament, to India on 26 September, 2011. We landed

in New Delhi from where we proceeded to Amritsar. My friend was fascinated by the organisation of the langar at the Darbar Sahib. I did *ishnaan* there and felt sublime peace at Guru Ram Das's abode.

My Swiss friend was quite keen to visit Lahore. He had already been several times to India but wanted to have a feel of genuine Punjabi culture. We had been discussing this over the preceding two years.

I told him that true Punjabi culture was now to be found only in the Pakistani Punjab from what I had observed there in 2007. The Indian Punjab had become 'Bollywood Punjab' where even Sikhs were unable to speak proper Punjabi. This is why we decided that he would visit Lahore to get a taste of genuine Punjabi and its hospitality while I would proceed to Chillianwala to fulfil my long standing desire.

However, my Swiss friend was advised by several people to avoid visiting Pakistan because of the prevailing anti-American sentiment there - the danger being that he might mistakenly be taken for an American.

With a heavy heart, we decided to abandon this plan. But my desire to visit Chillianwala was so strong that I decided to proceed there nevertheless. I crossed from India to Pakistan via the land border at Wagah on 30 September 2011 in the morning. The walk across from one gate to the other was a strong emotional experience.

Used to crossing frontiers in Europe, especially in the Schengen zone between Switzerland and its neighbouring countries (France, Germany, Italy, Austria), without any hassles, I experienced a completely different border crossing from India to Pakistan. However, privileged personal contacts on both sides of the border meant that I was able to cross over to Pakistan and return the following day to India without any administrative or other problems whatsoever. Officials on both sides were extremely helpful, kind and courteous.

I sincerely hope that the border between India and Pakistan will become like the borders of Switzerland with its neighbours where people will be able to cross freely and develop mutual relations in peace and harmony.

I was received on the Pakistani side by a retired former Secretary to the Pakistan government. Displaying unmatched hospitality, he came all the way to the border at Wagah in person instead of just sending his car and driver. We drove straight from Wagah to Gujranwala, the birth place of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and on to Gujrat, site of another famous battle during the Second Anglo-Sikh War, known as the 'Battle of the Cannons'.

There is no change of landscape from one side of the Punjab to the other. Lush fields crisscrossed by irrigation channels are visible till the far horizon.

Gujranwala's main bazaar was quite crowded. All these names were quite familiar to me from my childhood when I used to listen to conversations between my parents, other relatives and friends, mostly refugees from Pakistan in 1947. In fact, I am the only member of my family born in present day India since I was born in 1951.

My elder brother who retired as Additional Chief Secretary to the Government of Karnataka after a life long career in the IAS, was born in 1944 in Nankana Sahib. So crossing each city with names familiar to me from my childhood made me remember my deceased parents and my childhood memories assailed me even as I was being driven through cities and villages in Pakistan.

My Pakistani host was a man of vast administrative experience, having served at the highest levels of the Pakistani government. He was born in Jalandhar. So, by the usual irony of sub-continental history, I, the heir to a family from what is now Pakistan was being hosted by him, hailing from what is now India. He told me that he had visited Jalandhar as well as several other places in India.

After a drive lasting around two and a half hours, we reached Gujrat, a major city in Punjab. My host had spoken to one of his friends there. This person is a practising lawyer and a notable there.

We were driven to his palatial house where I was introduced to a large number of local notables. True Punjabi hospitality was on display. There were at least ten dishes on the table for a 'quick meal'. The lawyer has a nephew active in politics in Zürich in Switzerland. He greeted me extremely warmly. He confirmed that he had arranged our visit to Chillianwala, about 40 km from Gujrat, with a local landlord whose ancestor had fought on the side of the Sikh forces against the British.

We left Gujrat for Chillianwala in a convoy of vehicles, with the lawyer's young son driving us in his Toyota Landcruiser. We met up with our local landlord on the way in a place called Dinga, which is mentioned in accounts of the Battle of Chillianwala.

We arrived at Chillianwala around 3.30 pm. I had a feeling of intense gratitude to Waheguru for fulfilling my wish to visit this place. There is a memorial pillar in red stone, surrounded by a boundary wall. There are several graves within the walled compound. The memorial is quite well maintained. There is no mention of who maintains the compound. Cattle were grazing peacefully some distance from the walls.



Apart from the red stone pillar, there is another pillar topped by a Celtic cross just outside the walled compound. There are two stone inscriptions around this pillar. One mentions the names of the British officers and men who fell in battle here. This list contains the names of two Brigadier Generals. There is no list of any names of Sikh officers or soldiers who fell in battle here.

However, the red stone pillar inside the compound has inscriptions in English, Gurmukhi, Farsi and Urdu, mentioning that a major battle was fought here on 13 January, 1849 in which brave soldiers of both sides were killed. The graves in the compound do not have names or details marked on them.



I requested my companions to let me have a few moments by myself, so they left me alone. I did ardaas for those who lost their lives on this battlefield. I prayed to Waheguru Almighty to give our Sikh Panth similar bravery and spirit as had motivated our ancestors in those heroic times. I expressed my gratitude for all the blessings bestowed by Him on us.

An old man saw our party in the compound and walked up to us. He mentioned that all the graves were those of British officers except one triangular in shape which was supposed to be that of Sikh general, Sher Singh. This cannot be true since I have not found confirmation of General Sher Singh having lost his life at Chillianwala in either Khushwant Singh's *History of the Sikhs* or Captain Amrinder Singh's *The Last Sunset: The Rise and Fall of the Lahore Durbar*, which I consulted on this point.

Be that as it may, this one particular gravestone is triangular in shape.

I tried to absorb the entire surroundings. This is how I recharge my spiritual batteries by closing my eyes and imagining how our ancestors performed heroic feats at such places. I imagined the sound of horses galloping across the small hillocks and thorny bushes that adorn the surroundings of the battlefield. I imagined the sound of artillery pieces firing round after round. I felt proud to be a Sikh, inheritor of such a long tradition of bravery and heroism.

Chillianwala washed away, at least for some time, feelings of pessimism that sometimes assail me in moments of weakness when I observe the state of present day Sikh society. I was back with my role models in time.

An account of the Battle of Chillianwala in Capt. Amrinder Singh's book, *The Last Sunset*, mentions that the then Governor General of India, Lord Dalhousie, decided to relieve the English General, Lord Gough, of his command following his inability to defeat the Sikh forces at Chillianwala. Sikh valour caused so much consternation even back in England that the Duke of Wellington - of Waterloo fame - then nearly 80 years old, appealed to Sir Charles Napier to proceed to India to take command of British troops in the Second Anglo-Sikh War, failing which he, the Duke himself, would have to do so.

This gives an idea of just how much Sikh heroism and valour on the battlefield had destabilised the British.

My host, the former Secretary to the government of Pakistan, was not very familiar with the facts about Chillianwala. I explained to him on the battlefield as much as my limited knowledge allowed. The serenity of the surroundings, with the village of Chillianwala peacefully nestling in the background, starkly contrasted with my imagination of the sounds of battle raging all around us at the place where we stood.

A local person told me that there were hardly any visitors to the site. It does not seem to be on the itinerary of Sikhs who proceed to Pakistan to mainly pay obeisance at our main gurdwaras like Punja Sahib and Nankana Sahib.

I hope that this report about my visit to Chillianwala motivates at least some readers to develop curiosity about visiting similar sites of Sikh valour and heroism.

I remembered the famous lines from Shah Mohammad's Varaa(n): "Jey hovey sarkaar taa(n) mul paavey khalsey ney jo teghaa(n) mariaa(n) nee(n); shah

*mohammada ik sarkaar bajho(n), faujaan jit key vi aj nu(n) haariaa(n) nee(n)*" from his epic account of the Anglo-Sikh Wars.

We left Chillianwala after an hour or so spent on site. We visited the local farm and race horse breeding stud farm of one of our hosts, a very hospitable man, a representative of true Punjabi culture.

Hearing all my companions talking chaste Punjabi was like music to my ears. On the Indian side it is nowadays extremely rare to hear such chaste Punjabi, at least in the circles I seem to move around in. I was the only one dressed in a shirt and trousers. All my hosts, rich powerful men without an exception, were dressed in kurtas and salwars, so much more comfortable than my dress. I felt really silly at not having travelled to Pakistan in similarly comfortable clothes.

The confidence of Punjabi-speaking Pakistanis is infectious. They have no inhibitions whatsoever in speaking Punjabi. The houses that I visited were palatial. One of my companions had a house constructed on five acres of land, with several buildings in the outer walled compound. We had lavish snacks and drinks (all non-alcoholic, another major difference from the Indian/Bollywood Punjab) at this house before I continued my journey on to Lahore where I spent the night.

Accompanied by my Pakistani former-civil-servant host, we reached Lahore around 19.20 pm. At my request, we proceeded straight to Gurdwara Dera Sahib, next to the Badshahi Mosque. Dera Sahib, for those Sikhs who might not know it, is the site of our fifth Master, Guru Arjan's martyrdom. I was just in time to join the evening *ardaas*, followed by the subsequent procession in which Guru Granth Sahib was carried for *sukh-aasan* for the night. The entire sangat consisted of four persons and I was able to be the fifth.

I considered this as a sublime finale to a most remarkable day. The fact of having been able to pay my respects at Guru Arjan's martyrdom site after a day spent at Chillianwala capped a special day in my life.

I shall carry the memory all my life.

After my two visits to Pakistan, some lines in our daily evening *ardaas* now have a special meaning for me when, at the very end, we pray to Waheguru Almighty to bless us with *darshan deedaar* of our shrines left behind in Pakistan after the Partition of Punjab.

My visit to Chillianwala shall mark an unforgettable event in my life, one that I hope to narrate to as many Sikh youngsters as I can to make them aware of our past which could guide us in our future.

*Jogishwar Singh*

*Managing Director of the Rothschild Group in Switzerland, Dr Jogishwar Singh is the first Sikh selected by the world renowned Group as Managing Director. Born in Khanna (India) in 1951, Dr Singh served in the IPS and IAS before leaving India in 1984. He restarted his professional career in Switzerland where his previous experience as an IAS officer had no resonance at all. With an M.Sc (Hons School) in Physics, MA in History from Punjab University, Dr Singh did his D.E.S.S. at Sorbonne in Paris, followed by a PhD from Ruprecht-Karls University in Heidelberg.*

*Dr Singh is fluent in eight languages.*

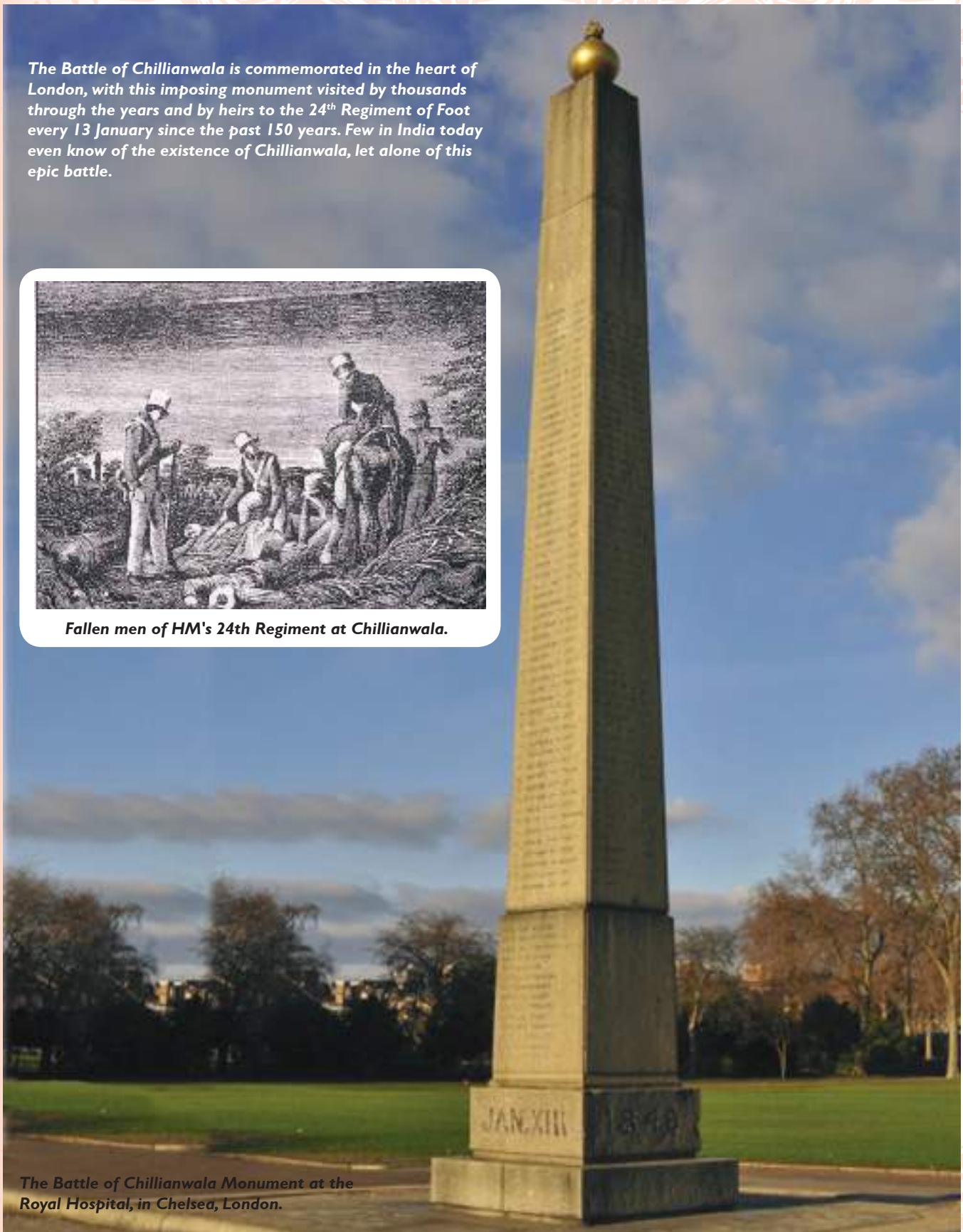


*Dr. Jogishwar Singh at the memorial at Chillianwala, 30 September 2011*

*The Battle of Chillianwala is commemorated in the heart of London, with this imposing monument visited by thousands through the years and by heirs to the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot every 13 January since the past 150 years. Few in India today even know of the existence of Chillianwala, let alone of this epic battle.*



***Fallen men of HM's 24th Regiment at Chillianwala.***



***The Battle of Chillianwala Monument at the Royal Hospital, in Chelsea, London.***



# The Sikh Darbar

Excerpts from the book 'The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus : The Court of God in the World of Men' by Louis E. Fenech, Professor of History, University of Northern Iowa. Published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

*True is the Lord and True is His Name. His speech in boundless love. [All people] speak and pray constantly repeating the refrain 'give [to us]'. As the True Giver gives [all] gifts what [offering] can we present before Him which will allow his court to appear?*

Sikh tradition has for long painted a dazzling portrait of the court or *darbar* of the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. Staffed by an impressive and auspicious number of poets, fifty two, as well as a smaller number of writers, the Guru's court produced a wide-ranging series of compositions. These include many current Sikh canonical works as found within the Dasam Granth and attributed to the Guru himself, the little-known *Sarab-loh Granth* (The Book of All-Steel, which is God), and other texts which are apparently no longer extant, such as the massive *Vidya Sagar* or 'Ocean of Knowledge'. The sole intent of this courtly literature was, we are told, to awaken India's oppressed masses to true heroism and to arouse within the Guru's

Sikhs and all those suffering under the tyranny of Aurangzeb's Mughal regime, the desire for justice and righteousness: to live a life in accord with that righteousness and to ensure its stability, with one's life of need be.

'At that time,' contemporary tradition maintains, *it was by no means an easy task to rouse the downtrodden servants (ghulamans) of the Mughal empire. For this purpose the [Guru and the writers of his darbar under his direction] treated their spiritual literature with strengthening agents, [a form of poetry manifesting] bir-rasi [the heroic sentiment], and presented it in a novel way.*

Although this interpretation is discussed in the late Piara Singh Padam's relatively recent analysis,



Maharaja Ranjit Singh at the Lahore Darbar. Musee national des Arts asiatiques-Guimet

*Sri Guru Gobind Singh ji de Darbari Ratan* (The Courtly Jewels of Guru Gobind Singh), it is an understanding which was firmly in place by the early nineteenth century. For example, in the 1801-2, a composition in praise of Bhai Mani Singh, the Shahid-Bilas (The Martyr's Splendour) attributed to Seva Singh Kaushish, we hear of the tenth Guru's court and the manifest effects of bir-rasi:

*Sangats from within and outside India came to obtain Guru Gobind's darshan (auspicious viewing). Fifty two [court] poets resided near the Guru in whose company was the gifted Mani Singh. From the blessed mouth of the [tenth] Guru, the kalgidhar [one who wears the aigrette's plume in his turban], was spoken a homily in bir-rass [the heroic style of verse] taken from within the Krishan Charitar acknowledging the battle of Kharag Singh. On hearing [this homily] timidity fled the hearts of all listeners [and in its place] a great desire to engage in righteous battle flared within.*

An apocryphal nineteenth-century text, the *Gurukian Sakhian* (Narratives of the Gurus) explicitly shares this opinion of the effects of the heroic style. Having just briefly read through Hirda Ram Bhalla's epic text, the *Hanuman Natak*, the tenth Guru loudly exclaims:

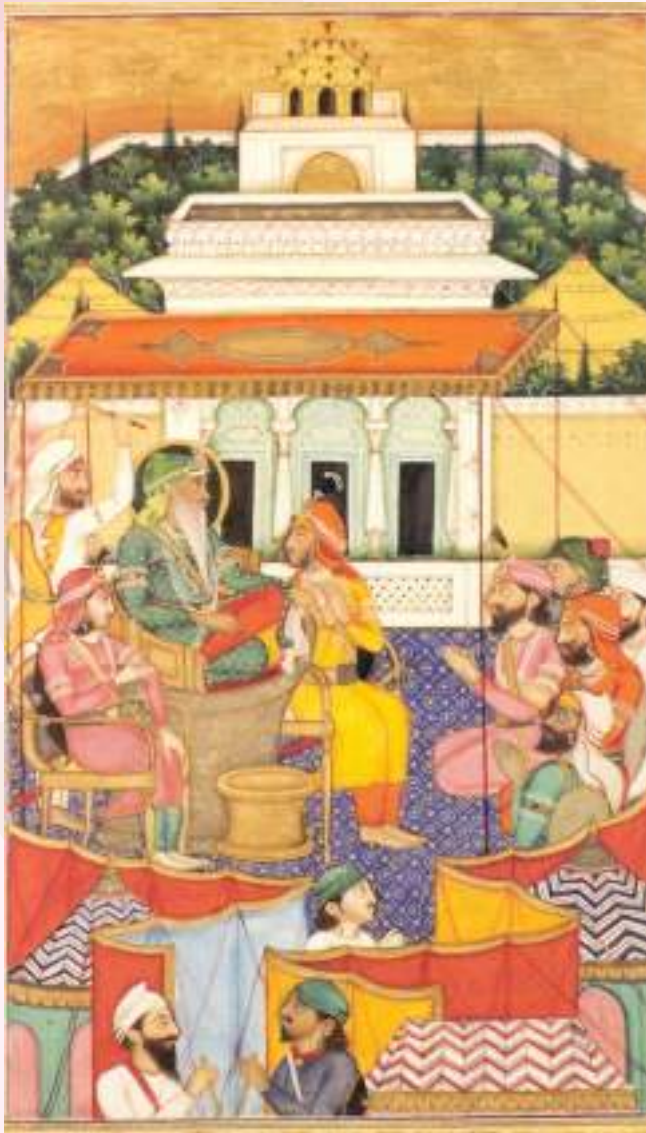
*O Brother Sikh! By reading this book [even] a cowardly and weak person can become a heroic warrior. This text is filled to the brim with the very essence of heroism (bir-ras).*

For at least one of the poets who is supposed to have been associated with the Tenth Guru, such sentiments doubtlessly achieved their lofty goals. In the epilogue to Kavi Kankan's *Das Gur Katha* (The Story of the Ten Gurus) the Sikh Panth had itself become the sole repository of Hanuman's extraordinary strength:

After [the first] ten Rudras the eleventh [Rudra appeared and] was known as Hanuman. And so in a similar manner after the ten [Sikh] Gurus the Sikh [Panth] was known as Hanuman because the Sikh [Panth] on its own [manifests] as much legendary strength as Hanuman possessed; it occurred to Kavi Kankan that in this there is no doubt.

By the mid-nineteenth century Sikh authors were convinced that the court of the tenth Master prepared all manners of editing courtly literature in order to strengthen those oppressed, as the famous Nirmala Sikh author Santokh Singh makes clear in his voluminous 1843 CE *Gur-pratap Suraj Granth*:

The poets [of the Guru's court] wrote [new] poetic works and these very same works made evident the



Ranjit Singh in darbar, Musee Jean de la Fontaine, Château-Thierry.

nine sentiments (*nav ras*) of literary adornment. Poets would come and go from the True Guru's presence writing and uttering beautiful poetry.

While the general characteristics of Sikh poetry produced at the Guru's court cannot be readily distinguished from Sikh poetry fashioned outside the court, the category 'court poetry' is nevertheless convenient and will be used to describe both devotional and secular subjects written within the courts of the Gurus. In Sikh tradition the intent of such courtly literature was both altruistic and inclusivist, and its successful implementation (responsible in part for the 'heroic' period of Sikh history) made both the courtiers of the Guru and the products of their court unique, allowing them to clearly outshine the darbars

of contemporary north Indian kings and princes – Mughal, Rajput, and Bijapuri amongst others – whose poets and artists selfishly exercised their arts solely for the edification and entertainment of their patrons and other courtiers. Piara Singh Padam once again captures this tone well, his Orientalism-istic rhythm notwithstanding:

*[Through the production of literature at his court] the True Guru applied the [combined] power of knowledge and action in order to continue protecting Indian culture and the welfare of common people. When the kings and great kings of other courts [had] splendid literature created out of consideration for [their own] amusement they would display their pomp and splendour thus nurturing the bad habit of applying [this literary] art for interests purely personal.*

For Padam, the patronage of obsequious poets and the praise of their encomiums, as well as the support of artists and architects who created such splendours as the Peacock Throne and the Taj Mahal with the sweat and blood of oppressed and unnamed Indian labourers, are all representative of the hollow vanity and selfishness implied above.

### Image(s) of the Sikh Court

This certainly presents a rather damaging image of the Mughal court and its contemporaries, but it is very interesting that Padam's criticism is generally directed to only one aspect of these darbars: their arts, especially their literature. Indeed, with Padam and contemporary Sikh tradition passing harsh judgement on these, but the disapproval of the Mughal court as a whole, however, remains a surprisingly qualified one, demonstrating Sikh tradition's ambivalence towards it. While on the one hand, as we have seen, Sikh tradition strongly objects to its art and literature, on the other it tacitly embraces, at least to limited degrees some of the standards of behaviour and comportment which Indo-Islamic and Mughal courtiers and kings were encouraged to display. It also adopted the aura of the ideal Indo-Timurid prince, a courtly image especially noticeable in the representation of the tenth Sikh Master, Guru Gobind Singh. Early Sikh tradition significantly accepted and displayed a number of Mughal symbols denoting power and royalty and thus legitimacy and authority, for example, kettledrums (*nagaara: naqqarah*); tents (*khaimah, bargah*); *khil'ats* or *siropas* (*sar o pa* [from] head to foot'; robes of honour), and

the production of books to name but a few. These significant items were present and utilised throughout Western, Central, and Southern Asia as well as within the cosmopolitan ecumene around Byzantium well before the period of the Delhi Sultanate, but their semiotic potential was generally enhanced in the place and period under discussion by the court of the Central Asian conqueror Amir Timur (d.1405 CE) and that of his successors, amongst whom are of course included the prominent Mughal emperors of India. While pre-modern Sikh tradition has very little if anything to say about the panegyric literature of the royal court (probably because eighteenth-century Sikh authors were not directly familiar with it) or its splendid arts, its recognition of the symbolic forms, tropes, and imagery of the Indo-Timurids was based simply on precedents well-established since the very beginning of the Sikh tradition. This recognition appears even within early manuscript copies of the *Adi Granth*, such as the penultimate Kartarpuri *bir* or recension of the scripture and its earlier, celebrated draft copy, ms.245 at the Guru Nanak Dev University library. One of the folios of ms. 1245, for example bears the *shamsa* (Persian for 'sunburst'), a symbol long held dear in the preparation of manuscripts within the larger Islamicate whose presence was indicative of both divine glory (the *nur* of the Qur'an) as well as the divine light which God 'directly transfers to kings' (a 'divine stamp of authority' Abu'l Fazl 'Allami implies). The existence of the *shamsa* raises questions about authority and implies that the scribes and artists who worked on the text were familiar with Islamicate manuscript standards, most likely receiving their training in Lahore. The *shamsa* folio also suggests that the manuscript was most likely intended for a royal patron which may tell us something further about the nature of Guru Arjan's court in which this text was produced.



In many instances, moreover, the very image of the Guru is commensurate with glorious representations reserved for the Mughal emperors (and later Rajput rajas) themselves. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century Sikh art, for example, includes portraits struck onto Sikh coins and 'temple tokens' is replete with images of the Gurus, particularly Guru Gobind Singh, painted and/or cast in a regal style reminiscent of Mughal miniatures. A figure, for example, that was found pasted into a very early manuscript copy of the *Dasam Granth* is perhaps the earliest such representation of Guru Gobind Singh, if the date is accurate, was painted very soon after the inauguration of the Khalsa Order in 1699 during a relatively calm period in the life of the Tenth Master. It may be for this reason that the Guru is here rendered very sensitively, as a *padishah* or emperor, in a very calm and relaxed pose. He is shown in portrait (rather than the three quarters profile common to Mughal illustrations) kneeling

on a dais or *palki*, hands gently holding an arrow, while a bow is placed before him and a sword in its magnificent sheath dangles on his left side. In his *kamarband* (cummerbund) is tucked a *katar* (punch dagger), the hilt of which appears to be overlaid with gold in *kundan* (Urdu: 'finest [gold]') technique and set with various gems. He is being fanned with a peacock-feather fan by a bare-foot attendant who appears in a far more humble costume.

It should be made clear that this painting would never be mistaken as a Mughal illustration. The turban style is not late seventeenth century Mughal and appears to suggest a Rajput influence, quite likely due to Anandpur-Makhowal's proximity to the various *pahari* or hill regions of the Punjab whose Rajput nobility traced their lineage to Lord Rama and his sons, the Hindu gods of Rajput lore. Indeed, even the *jamah* or robe is tied under the Guru's left arm, the

more common Hindu style of dress as seen in Pahari paintings, and not under the right which was the accepted Mughal manner. This leads one to conclude that the Pahari ateliers are the most likely origin of this artist's influence.

This claim notwithstanding, clearly recognisable nevertheless are Mughal stylistic contributions. This stems most likely from the fact that mid-seventeenth to early eighteenth-century *pahari* Rajput portraits were very much affected by Mughal art and styles as recent scholarship has argued persuasively. The emphasis in this portrait, for example, manifests that same stress we discover in Mughal painting during and after the period of Jahangir, an emphasis which 'consistently recognises, acknowledges, and investigates the individuality and personal uniqueness of the people it portrays. It does this though with neither the shading nor the play on light characteristic of Jahangiri Mughal portraiture – which is here non-existent (the lack of shading for example is especially noticeable in the boldly drawn lines indicating folds on the jamah of the attendant and the small white *rumal* [handkerchief] which he holds in his left hand, as well as on the green *patka* or sash tucked under the Guru's left arm) but rather with vibrant colour. To this end the landscape is bleak and in large part muted in tones of jade-apple green (though with a top band of vibrant blue and a line of light lapis lazuli-blue cloud shapes) while the Guru, in the middle of the painting, is clearly the centre of attention. He is boldly drawn and beautifully dressed in a bright red jamah bespeckled with a five-dotted yellowish design which on very close inspection suggests paisleys. The Guru also wears a necklace, bracelets, and earrings of pearls indicative of his importance while a cushion whose upholstery is dotted with what appears to be chrysanthemum blossoms supports his back. The skilful execution patterns seen here on the cushion and the brown and blue *patka* whose folds are gingerly draped over the Guru's bent knees, as well as the intricate floral pattern on the sword's scabbard, follow very much an Islamicate stylistic sensibility underscoring the ubiquity of Islamicate standards. The beauty of the scabbard so draws the viewer's attention that one is persuaded to think that the artists is here not just emphasising the tenth Guru's imperial nature but rather Gobind Singh's reverence for the sword which is invoked in the prologue of the *Bachitar Natak*, the so-called autobiography of the tenth Guru, as the

supreme symbol of the divine. This emphasis on the Guru and the divine suggests that the Guru's court was not as intensely conscious of style and fashion as the courts of both the Rajputs and the Mughals (at least before Aurangzeb's period). Indeed, here there is little show of the engagement which one often sees in lavish Mughalised courtly scenes.

A case in point would be the Guru's attendant whose waist is bound with a cummerbund into which is placed a far less fancy katar. This figure blends into the background and foreground with his plain white finery and the focus lands upon the fanciful peacock-feathered *chauri* or whisk (also known as a *morcham*) by which he is fanning the Guru. Frozen in time right above the tenth Guru's head, the whisk is reminiscent of the regal canopy or *chhattri*.

'Mughalised portraits' of non-Mughal figures such as Guru Gobind Singh and the *pahari* rajas were subjected to such Islamicate styles, as Catherine Glynn claims in her analysis of the paintings of Bilaspur Kahlur royalty (a royal family with whom Guru Gobind Singh was quite familiar as they find mention in writings attributed to the tenth Master), in order to project and mythologise a reign and an image on the one hand and to retain a 'visual biography of persons critical to the development and advancement of the empire' on the other. In this vein other portraits, though in a different style, picture the Tenth Guru seated on a dais surrounded by courtiers and family in a type reminiscent more of later *pahari* Rajput miniatures. The painting is still clearly Mughalised as it depicts a courtly scene which seems to have much in common with mid-eighteenth century portraits painted in the *pahari* region of Mandi, just to the north of Bilaspur-Kahlur although it also shares commonalities with Rajput paintings within the Rajput homeland to the south. According to Vishakha Desai, for example, "heavily Mughalised Rajasthani pictures often depict courtly rather than religious or literary subjects."

These various adoptions in manuscripts and on canvas, particularly from areas of the Mughal court which contemporary Sikh tradition censures, imply that the nature of the Sikh court and its 'courtly culture' if any, particularly during the guruship of the Tenth Master is not as altogether straightforward as modern Sikh scholars like Piara Singh Padam suggest. Despite the contemporary condemnation of the literature of the Islamicate courts and eighteenth-



century Sikh tradition's vehemence towards certain members of the court, in particular Aurangzeb and other Mughal courtiers and officials who harmed the fortunes of the nascent Sikh Panth, it is in many ways by appropriating the imposing language and symbols of these courts and the 'grammar' of their rituals, particularly that of the darbar of the Mughals, that Sikhs describe in large part not only the Tenth Master's darbar but indeed the courts of all previous Gurus, beginning with Guru Nanak. As this style of description occurs well before the very completion of the Adi Granth in the early seventeenth century it is very likely that the Sikh Gurus, especially Guru Gobind Singh, themselves adopted many such courtly symbols and features, and their accompanying Persianite terminology. This must have been a way to continue and buttress the Sikh legacy, a bequest of which the Tenth Guru was particularly cognizant as the *Bachitar Natak* makes abundantly clear.

Such an awareness becomes manifest in the Sikh *bansavali* and *gur-pranali* (also: *gurpranavali*), texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that are concerned with tracing the proper lineage and legacies of the Sikh Gurus. Put simply, the Sikh Gurus and their disciples embraced the very 'grammar' of the Mughal court, its rituals, symbols, and ceremonies to convey power and authority as would be understood in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; became adept in its use and adapted it accordingly to reflect their particular situations and fulfill their own unique and multiple interests. Clearly this was no mere mimicry nor was it simply the mechanical functionalism of 'legitimation'. As Sumit Guha notes in the context of the sixteenth-century Marathi-speaking courts of the Deccan, "Total assimilation to the glorious imperial court was dangerous, if not tempting." In the end therefore, Islamicate courtly precedence was one feature albeit an extremely important one which provided in part the framework for what was a much larger, uniquely Sikh construction, a Sikh courtly "world", which is coherent in its own terms. It was perhaps during the time of the tenth Guru that the Sikh community became most adept at such revisions.

## A Quest for Rationale

The above statements are meant to strike a note of caution. One must be vigilant in any attempt to delineate the Sikh court as this is a formidable task given the nature of the historical record. Nowhere

in it do we find, for example, a source equal to the autobiography of the seventeenth-century Kayastha Hindu, Bhimsen Burhanpuri, the *Tarikh-i-Dil-Kusha* (The Heart-revealing History) which specifies in part the court life and behavior and beliefs of the Mughal nobility of Aurangzeb's time from the perspective of one of its minor members, which details the prerequisites for membership to the Sikh court. Nor does one discover guidebooks along the lines of the late-seventeenth century *Mirza-namahs* (Gentleman's Guide), which supply information on the standards, behaviours, restraints, and etiquettes cultivated by Sikh courtiers which bound them together, thereby separating the Sikh court from the wider Sikh Panth of its respective periods. One could argue that the *rahit-namas* most certainly serve in this capacity as guides to Sikh refinement but these important texts are not restricted to a select few disciples but open to all Sikhs. For the actual details of the Sikh court, we must therefore search elsewhere. That disciples surrounded the Sikh Gurus and performed selfless service both for the Guru's benefit and for the Panth seems a very reasonable conclusion to draw, in the light of both contemporary evidence and the testimony of tradition. To this very day Sikh sants, babajis, and in some cases bibijis within the Punjab are often seen surrounded by a coterie of loyal followers and disciples who selflessly serve them and their respective communities in a variety of ways. But did such Sikh men and women of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries form the Guru's court? Did they collectively give shape to a social formation coherent in its own terms as suggested above? The answer to this question depends upon how one interprets the phrase 'coherent on its own terms' as the evidence, both Sikh and non-Sikh, as we shall see, is simply unclear.

Although the Gurus probably held court (that is, presided over receptions or gatherings of Sikhs) it is far more difficult to ascertain whether or not they possessed a formal court with designated attendants, advisors, newswriters, agents, canopy-bearers, and so on, who were regularly in attendance and formed a hierarchy bound together by a precise etiquette. The contemporary evidence which is available makes clear that the Sikh court was not the 'first household of the extended royal family', a characteristic shared by most royal courts generally, European and Asian alike. This same evidence nevertheless suggests, as we shall see, the existence of some of the court personnel noted above (contemporary Sikh accounts make no

attempt to distinguish between particular sections of the Sikh 'nobility'). Both these implications precipitate the following *pauri* in which we find loyal servants, scribes, and musicians within the retinue of the Guru:

*Precious are the hands of the gurmukh (Guru-facing Sikh) who does the Guru's work in the sadh sangat, the congregation of true believers. He draws drinking water [for the faithful]; fans [the sangat]; grinds the flour; washes [the feet of the Guru] and takes amrit, sanctified water, from the Guru's feet. He writes the Guru's hymns and [binds the pages together as] books (pothian), and plays the cymbals, drum, and rabab.*

We speak in the subjunctive above because of the confusion engendered by the ambiguous nature of the language used. Terms such as *seva* for example, which can refer to the courtier's pledged service to the sovereign, an entirely worldly idea, relied upon views which developed in the religious arena, connoting in Sikhism generally selfless service in the soteriological sense used by the Sikh Gurus. The above passage from Bhai Gurdas is thus very much in line with the many general references we discover in the Adi Granth in which Persianite terms for 'royal court' appear and in which the royal courtier is sparingly defined.

One may cite Guru Nanak's *Siri rag* 18 as example:

*Through hearing (lit., 'acquiring') the sacred utterances which are unspoken self-centredness is eliminated. Forever am I a sacrifice to those who selflessly serve their True Guru. They are clothed [in robes of honour] (painalai) [while] standing (also: 'having been brought') in the Court (dargah) of the Lord. [Indeed] the very Name of Hari the Divine Master has its abode on their lips.*

Although lacking in concrete description, Guru Nanak here speaks of the otherworldly court of the Supreme Lord in which the gurmukh is gifted with robes of honour, a recurrent theme in the bani of Guru Nanak, underscoring the reward for the name-conscious individual. Certainly Bhai Gurdas had this court in mind while preparing his *pauri* but the sixteenth-century northern Indian context in which he wrote also saw the rise of Amritsar as an important centre of commerce, the increasing importance of the Sikhs as a political and economic power and the rising significance of the office of the Sikh Guru (about all of which more will be said) under both Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan. Therefore, there was more that exercised our revered theologian's imagination.

The sentiments in both *var* 6:12 and the hymns of the Adi Granth suggest that upon the Islamicate framework we noted above were placed features modeled along the same patterns as the Sikh sangat of the period of the Gurus. As such the Sikh darbar was a more open, fluid court in the sense that Sikh values and standards of refinement, love, loyalty, beauty, service, etc. idealised by courtiers inhabiting other courts were to be cultivated by all Sikhs and potential gurmukhs alike in their self fashioning and were not simply the prerogative of a restricted, talented, well-born few who ultimately formed a powerful and prestigious elite. Although sources attributed to the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadar, suggest a courtly hierarchy, it is nevertheless difficult to imagine a closed and limited Sikh court presided over by the Sikh Gurus, especially because their message was self-consciously inclusivist and available to everybody regardless of caste; creed; or, indeed, sex. This fluidity is clearly evident during the period of Guru Gobind Singh, the Sikh Guru who most certainly possessed a court (albeit a limited one), to whom the *Akal Ustati* (In Praise of the Timeless Lord) is attributed. This is a portion of the Sikh canon which highlights the inclusive nature of humanity (Sikh court over a number of years). Its rudiments of membership and the etiquette prescribed were relaxed and far from formal as they were not to be found so much in one's dress, appearance, gestures, knowledge of the outside world, and ability to consume conspicuously (crucial factors in classical Indian, Delhi Sultanate, and Indo-Timurid courts), or in various court ceremonial (all of which Guru Nanak claims are supremely inferior to meditation upon the divine name), but more in an individual's love and loyalty to the Guru and the nascent Panth. More important was the ability to cultivate the qualities of the Guru-oriented Sikh, one whose character and practices were eventually outlined in both the Adi Granth and the *varan* of the Bhai Gurdas. One particular Brajbhasha *kaḥitt* (a quatrain with 31 or 32 syllables ) by Bhai Gurdas puts the matter in a quintessentially Sikh way, contrasting general characteristics and symbols of Indic and Indo-Timurid courtly culture with what our esteemed amanuensis considered their more virtuous equivalents:

*Make moderation and truth the throne; balance and contentment the minister, righteousness and forbearance of the royal banner; and so the empire will be steadfast. Make blissful abode the home and embrace mercy as the wife. Make good fortune the treasurer and fear [of God] the*

nourishment and the aim [of life] will be fulfilled. Make contemplation your wealth and the highest of all wealth (knowledge of the divine) your diplomacy. Make forgiveness your king (chhatrpati) and the shade of his canopy will grace [the world] with gracefulness. Bliss for all and peace for your subjects will be the delight while the divine light in all things will be made apparent and the unstruck melody will sound [securing salvation].

Let us note these qualities for membership were relaxed in only this sense, for as Guru Nanak implies, the Sikh courtier must walk the same path as that travelled by all pious Sikhs, 'a narrow lane as thin as the edge of a double-edged sword'.

Although ideally the Mughal court too was an open one in the sense that an individual's ability was a criterion for entry, its members were nevertheless drawn from only this sense, for as Guru Nanak implies, the Sikh courtier must walk the same path as that travelled by all pious Sikhs, 'a narrow lane as thin as the edge of a double-edge sword'.

Of course the nature of the Sikh court did change, most likely from guruship to guruship, in response to the new circumstances in which the Gurus and the Panth found themselves over the roughly two-hundred year Guru Period of Sikh history (c. 1500-1708). The ideal criteria for inclusion may be gathered from the famous eleventh var of Bhai Gurdas in which are revealed, by name, specific Sikhs from all walks of late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century life, Sikhs who are so mentioned in part because of their abilities to embody the qualities of the gurmukh. Amongst the valued traits are devotion to and absorption within the *nam* (Name) or within *gurbani* (11:14:5; 11:13:8), contemplation of the Word (*sabad vichara* 11:18:7), a detached nature (*udasi* 11:13:1), benevolent altruism (*paraupkari* 11:15:4), and bravery (*surma* 11:24:5). All these are meant to be brought together harmoniously with perhaps the most important quality for Bhai Gurdas, selfless service to the Guru and the Panth, the attribute most often repeated in his descriptions. The many Sikhs who manifested these were the Sikhs who had found honour in the court of the Guru, thus forming an implied Sikh nobility: these were the true courtiers of the Guru whose example other Sikhs who wished to rise to a courtly stature could most hope to imitate. In many ways, therefore, it may well appear that the activities at the Sikh court in an important sense were the activities which all Sikhs were encouraged to emulate.

*Kalu [the Khatri who] humbly faced [his Master] placed his hope in the sacred utterances of the Guru and achieved honour [lit., 'congratulations'] in the court [of the Guru].*

and

*Mallia and Saharu, who were proficient calico printers [land who resided in the village of Dalla] were/became courtiers (darbari) in the court of the [third] Guru (gur dargah).*

It is certainly worth mentioning that the context in which Bhai Gurdas prepared this important *var* is significant. It seems that Bhai Gurdas is doing far more than simply outlining the characteristics of the gurmukh and the darbari. Once again he reminds seventeenth-century Sikhs of the qualities which was most likely open to question by our theologians owing to the activities of the Guru's masands (to which we shall return in the next chapter). The masands were the second generation who mainly inherited their positions from their positions from their fathers, and were most likely assuming the elite airs of royalty which ultimately led to their offices' end under the tenth Sikh Master. We assume for example that when Guru Hargobind shifted his headquarters to Kiratpur thus absenting himself from the central Punjab, his hold over the masands – whose offices were not hereditary weakened, a weakening no doubt exacerbated by the sixth Master's more assertive stance. This is perhaps why Bhai Gurdas emphasised the idea of selfless service and outlined in *var* 11:22 the characteristics that constitute the 'great/best masands' (*vadde masand*).

## Narrativising the Sikh Court

Under the loving hand of tradition, however, circumstantial references to a Sikh court are transformed into genuine ones. What seems instructive for our purposes is that the traditional narratives of the Sikh court to which we shall intermittently refer appear at a rather confusing time in Sikh history, the eighteenth century. Certainly Khalsa Sikhs under Banda (d.1716) had been the first Sikhs to strike that most regal of symbols, the coin. The reasons for such an unprecedented step may be fathomed from a hukam-nama attributed to Banda in which he claims, '*Asa sat yug vartaia hai*' ('We have established the Age of Truth'). Banda and his Sikhs struck this coin to mark a new era, a point understood by the edict's date of 12 *Poh*, year 1 (12 December 1710 CE). However, this age was precipitated not by Banda himself and the Khalsa



Sikhs under his general direction but rather by the Sikh Gurus (despite its beginning with Banda's rule). It seems only natural that Sikhs saw the sovereignty and the empire which such symbols evoked originating with the Gurus and their courts, easily the source of Sikh authority. The so-called *Gobindshahi* couplet cast on Banda's seal whose imprint can be clearly seen in his hukam-namas, and slight variations of which were also struck upon many eighteenth and nineteenth-century Sikh coins thereafter, made those sentiments abundantly clear. Eighteenth-century references to the earlier Sikh courts of the Gurus therefore may be apocryphal attempts to demonstrate both the symbolic legitimacy of the sovereignty of the Sikhs under Banda, the later Sikh misls, and, under Ranjit Singh too.

To this we may add other factors which highlight the fondness for the court of the Gurus. Although contemporary tradition still maintains the exciting though simplistic nature of eighteenth-century Sikh history as a time in which righteous Sikhs as a uniform power confronted the forces of evil and despair, it was in reality a phase during which the Panth was clearly divided (perhaps severely). The first half of the eighteenth century witnessed Jat Sikh zamindars support the depredation of Banda against Muslims and non-Jat, particularly Khatri, Sikhs, and Hindus. Threatened by such Khalsa Sikhs, Khatri Sikhs, especially around the Ganges Basin and within Delhi itself, sided with Mughal forces to protect their more vested interests, an alliance which

is implied in Sainapati's *Sri Gur-sobha* (1711 CE) and made explicit in early eighteenth-century Persian chronicles, especially the *Akhbarat-I Darbar-I Mu'alla'* ('News from the Exalted Court') of Emperor Bahadar Shah (1707-12 CE). Indeed, in some cases it seems that Sikhs even 'became' Muslims (at least superficially) in order to avoid becoming targets of Mughal wrath. It seems clear that Banda's coin casting activities in themselves suggest that the Sikh Panth was by no means united. Apart from broadcasting a message of Banda's power and intentions to the Mughal emperor himself (the passages on both the seal and the extant coins were in Persian after all) such actions most likely attempted to quell at least one dimension of Sikh dissent which followed in Banda's wake. Later in the eighteenth century the situation did not improve much. The late 1720s for example, saw the beginning of internecine battles which were somewhat relaxed during the period of Nawab Kapur Singh (1733-53 CE), only to be taken up again after the establishment of the Sikh *misls* (confederations) in the mid-eighteenth century. These mutually destructive struggles were dramatically muted when the *misls* were brought together under the auspices of Ranjit Singh in the late eighteenth century.

Although such anomalies certainly appeared during the time of the Gurus as the occasional hymn highlighting the infamous detractors of Sikh history implies, later Sikh writers had the benefit of chronological distance. Conflicts between what Sikhs did and the ideal actions prescribed within Sikh writings such as the *Adi Granth*, the *janam-sakhis*, and the *rahit-namas* were just too evident. Writers such as Kirpal Das Bhalla and Kesar Singh Chhibbar amongst others, looked back upon a now-mythicalised past in the light of an anomalous present and assigned to that golden age a greater simplicity, grandeur, and morality. While the Sikhs of the early to mid-eighteenth century were thus involved at times in internecine disputes and were very much a marginalised community with little power and wealth to support a courtly life that could sustain Sikh writers such as the brahman Chhibbar Sikhs, the earlier courts of the Gurus were presented by our Sikh authors in a very significant way. They were presented as grand and influential centres of largesse whose nobles were selfless Sikh warrior/servants fighting on behalf of their Guru and Master, and all those threatened by oppression on the hand, and pious and devoted Sikhs writing and reciting

poetry, and singing shabads on the other, all of whom provided examples of the ideal Khalsa Sikh.

This is a later eighteenth-century tradition however, for although the earliest of these traditional accounts, *Sri Gursobha* does make reference to both the kingly and divine nature of Guru Gobind Singh and his possession of a Sikh darbar, its concerns are focused on the character of the court therefore generally serve this purpose, describing the arms which such Khalsa Sikhs carried to the court and the seva that they performed without detailing the comportment of its members or the structure of its membership. As such, Sainapati's references to poets such as himself and his contemporaries in this text are negligible (through we shall later note references to his fellow poets in other works attributed to him).

Despite Sainapati's economy of words on the court of the Tenth Master, it was the Sikh court of Guru Gobind Singh, the latest in the recent memory of our mid-eighteenth century authors, which easily became the court upon which they most prolifically exercised their art. This was in large part possible because Guru Gobind Singh did indeed have in his possession a number of regal courtly symbols, having requested these from his Sikhs in his *hukam-namas* or written instructions. It is no surprise therefore that eighteenth and nineteenth century Sikh authors note these royal items and incorporate them into a kingly and courtly paradigm. In his early-nineteenth century *gur-bilas* text for example, Koer Singh alludes to such royal possessions as those found in both princely tentage and textiles when he describes a young Gobind Singh about to leave Patna to the sorrow of his Biharis disciples:

*The [young] Guru Sahib was prepared [to leave]. He fixed his baggage which consisted of countless items, accessories [virtually] without number. [These included] tents (tambu) and qanats (tent enclosures), and very lovely canopies. As well were found jajams (Persian: jajim, a flat woven rug of Turkic origin), a shataranj (Persian: shatarnji, a type of carpet) and sudhari a type of sharp weapon), a chariot and palanquin, prized horses (bajar) an camels. Upon [the backs of] a number of these animals [and within the confines of the chariot and palanquin] the Guru's equipment was secured.*

According to Persian authors, both contemporary with and later than the period of the Tenth Master, Guru Gobind Singh's continued possession of these

created the impression that he comported himself like a raja, a behaviour for which Aurangzeb (and, as the *Bachitar Natak* makes clear, those rajas whose domains adjoined the Guru's territory at Anandpur – Makhowal) sought to chastise him.

According to Grewal and Bal,

*Gobind seems to have been so fascinated by a court with kingly appearances that later he maintained it even when that was likely to result in Aurangzeb taking some stern action against him.*

The adoption of such symbols seems to have made more than simply a passing impression on our Persian authors as in a *hasbulhukam* (Arabic: 'as commanded,' ornately written imperial communications) dictated by the emperor Aurangzeb to the secretary Inayatullah Khan. In this communication the tenth Guru is referred to as the *ra'is* or 'leader' of the Sikhs, a citation which seems to indicate a Mughal recognition of the Tenth Guru's authority.

It appears that the Tenth Guru took it upon himself as a leader to give out *sanads*. Early in the year 2000 just such a document, claimed to have been issued by Guru Gobind Singh as he made his way to Nanded in southern India, was discovered in the possession of a Brahman family in Harda, Madhya Pradesh. Within India, sanads (from the Arabic *isnad* referring to the chain of narrators which established; the legitimacy of a *hadith* (tradition) of the Prophet Muhammad) were documents forming contractual obligations between the issuer and the person(s) to whom the sanad was issued. Usually these granted the people named within, the rights over certain territories or the authority for holding an office and meant that the resources of the power issuing the sanad would back the legitimacy and the rights of the holder. Although only recognized Mughal officials could grant such sanads, the systems of issuing these documents began to fragment in the eighteenth century as the nature of Mughal power changed. If this is indeed a genuine document then it demonstrates that the tenth Guru and his Sikhs adopted this form of courtly authority.

It appears, moreover, that among those surrounding the Guru were a number of poets who wrote in both Brajbhasha and Persian (the most prominent of whom was Nand Lal Goya) some of whom were most likely living while our mid-century authors were writing. Within the extant court poetry of these men we often discover self-references and

sobriquets as well as indications that they wrote specifically within the darbar of Guru Gobind Singh. On the eighteenth folio of his composition dealing with *ras*, the *Bhav Panchashika* ('Give Doctrines Regarding the [Poetic] Sentiments') for example the poet Brind (Vrind) states that "Bhai Brind the poet composed a large number of poems in the [august] presence of Guru Gobind Singh."

The Poet Kuvaresh notes within his *Rati Rahass Kok* (The Secret of Love according to Koka), a Brajbhasha rendition of the famous *kamashastra* attributed to Pandit Koka (the *Koka-shastra*):

*May the poet Kuvresh always remain within the court (lit, dvar 'gate') of Guru Gobind.*

The stories of these poets and perhaps their poetry were most likely circulating among pious sangats in large part because of their proximity to their departed, beloved Guru (whom they regularly praise in their poetry). It is the presence of these poets in particular (and the scribes and messengers we discover in both the *hukam-namas* and contemporary Sikh literature as well as the musicians—dhadhis and ragis—implied) rather than the more observable symbols of regal courtliness which allows us to take the Tenth Guru's possession of a formal court for granted. Indeed, as is well known, since the eleventh century a court's grandeur (and thus its reputation) throughout the Islamicate was known for the poets in its employ. This is probably the reason why the Tenth Guru may have sought poets out and why his court is the best described in traditional Sikh history.

In this description we discover many of the personnel who were a part of the general courtly retinue of the Mughal darbars. In the narrative portions of his *rahit-nama*, for example, Chaupa Singh Chhibbar claims such status for many of his family members to demonstrate his household's intimate association with the darbar of the Tenth Master. Although he mentions in passing service to the courts of the seventh and eighth Gurus and more intimate ties with the court of the ninth Guru, he reserves his lengthiest praise for those Chhibbar Sikhs, himself included, who were in the courtly service of the Guru:

*[Guru Gobind Singh] commanded Sadhu Ram, a Sikh, to bring a robe of honour. Sahib Chand [Chhibbar] was draped [with this garment,] the Divan's sirpota. Dharam Chand [Chhibbar then] received the sirpota of stewardship and the treasury and both [Chhibbar Brahmans] took to their*

*duties. The Guru then had written instructions dispatched to the masands.*

We have here the office of the exchequer as well as the offices of the treasury and of the secretary. So too implied are the scribes whose task it was to write down the Guru's instructions. In eighteenth and nineteenth-century Sikh accounts such as these, it was not uncommon to observe warrior and scribal devotees stressing their undying loyalty to Guru Gobind Singh, their true padishah, whose concern for their welfare was simply undivided thus expressing 'the high profile codes of martial honour widely shared amongst specialist military communities [in Indo-Islamic northern India]. We witness too the Tenth Master himself lavishly awarding poets for a particularly clever composition in grand Indo-Timurid fashion. Santokh Singh, for example, whose own attempts to seek patronage from the courts of the various subordinate rajas under Ranjit Singh were at times limited or unsuccessful, claims that one of the tenth Master's court poets, Hans Ram Bajpei, himself refers to a reward he had received for versifying a portion of the great Sanskrit epic the Mahabharata:

*[The poet] translated into the common language [from Sanskrit] the Karna Parab (Sanskrit: Parva), the section [of the Mahabharata dealing with Karna, [the son of Mother Kunti and the Sun God Surya]. [As] the versification took on a beautiful tempo the poet obtained a reward amounting to a hundred thousand [rupees]. Through the mercy of the Guru the poet Hans Ram [who] wrote the chapter was honoured.*

It is very likely that Santokh Singh had read a number of works produced at the Guru's court (many of which were not swept away in the Sirsa River in 1705 as tradition claims) as the authors of a few of these do indeed mention in their introductions (*muddh*) gifts and rewards which the Guru had given to them. The prologue of Hans Ram's *sammatt* 1752 (1696 CE) Brajbhasha translation or rendition of the *Karma Parba* which is referred to by Santokh Singh above, mentions the Guru's gifts in what we may assume is an overstated fashion.

*Guru Gobind [Singh] first generously patronised [this poet] through his mercy and then rewarded [him] with sixty thousand [rupees].*

Comparing this passage with Santokh Singh's allows us to see first-hand the nineteenth-century author's further refinement in his version of events.

This is, however, an embellishment which is quite justified in the light of the contemporary hyperbole we discover in the words of the Tenth Master's court poet Mangal Rai, who in sammat 1753 (1697 CE) completed his translation of Book Nine of the Mahabharata, the *Shalya Parab*. We discover this passage in the epilogue to his translation:

*The segment dealing with Shalya [the king of Madras slain by Yudhishtira] was translated into the common language [of Brajbhasha] during the rule of Guru Gobind. He gives abundantly huge amounts of money (arab kharab, 'billions and trillions') in return for the poets' work.*

In more instances it seems that compensation for a poet's work was not monetary but rather material. Mangal Rai, Santokh Singh further claims that the tenth Guru 'satisfied his poets' with the gift of a Kashmiri shawl among other items:

*To [the poets] Shyam, Set, and Piri Guru Gobind gifted an expensive [Kashmiri] shawl (pamari) which was yellow, red, and green in colour.*

The first two hemistiches within the prologue of the *Jang-nam Guru Gobind Singh ji ka* written by the court poet Ani Ri (who is mentioned in both the hukam-nams of Guru Hari Krishan and Guru Tegh Bahadar), moreover, tell us that

*Ani Rai met with the Guru and he was blessed. 'Come' [the Guru himself said and he rewarded [Ani Rai] greatly. The Guru gave [him] a stunning golden and jewel-embedded token and had a hukam-nama specially written [in which] he expressed a delightful affection towards him.*

From contemporary accounts such as these and traditional accounts mentioned earlier, we infer that the Sikh court of the Tenth Master was clearly different from that of the Mughal emperors'. At the centre of the Sikh court was the one true spiritual king of the universe, an emperor who was not so concerned with impressing upon his courtiers 'the magnitude of imperial prestige and authority' the principal object behind Mughal courtly etiquette but rather the magnificence of the Divine. This was perhaps why Mangal Rai can claim that the Guru distributes 'wealth amounting to the billions and trillions,' a clear exaggeration intended to impress upon readers and listeners that the gifts one principally received from the Guru were spiritual rather than material. This was a court in which humble grass cutters (*ghahi*) like Bhai Dhanna Singh could rival imperial poets in their erudition and versifications. Such claims to

uniqueness notwithstanding, the delineating practices of the Sikh darbar were nevertheless the very stuff of Islamicate courts: tradition notes, for example, that the Guru held *majalis* or 'poetic jousts', a regular pursuit of Indo-Islamic courts since the eleventh century. This was a characteristic of the Guru's court which was often lauded, as Piara Singh Padam makes clear:

*One general feature [of the Guru's court] was the contest of a poet's dexterity (lit. 'contest of the poets poetic art'). In order to demonstrate their excessive skill several poets experimented (parakh karde) with poems (chhands) of many varieties while several [others] endeavoured to demonstrate these greater abilities in 'answering' (jawab) theirs [perhaps a reference to the modification of a poem by a 'rival' poet, a process known as jawab in Persian ghazal poetry]. Such [a development] is apparent for example in the poetic context between [the proud poet] Chandan and [the humble grass cutter] Bhai Dhanna Singh.*

To this too we may add tradition's insistence that the Guru gave and received robes of honour; was treated and referred to as a king and master; gave audience to visiting dignitaries who include Bhim Chand, the raja of Bilaspur-Kahlur, as well as both Rajas Fateh Shah of Garhwal and Medini Prakash of Nahan-Sirmur—within whose districts was situated Paonta Sahib. The Guru also undertook various other courtly duties such as overseeing the majalis of his poets. A glance through the surviving compositions of Guru Gobind Singh's many poets suggests that such courtly procedures were carefully observed. Indeed, one could argue that such images and practices associated with Islamicate courts in general persist well into modern-day Sikhism as the very gathering of Sikh sangats in a gurdwara, anywhere in the world, with its court-like ceremony is reminiscent of the Mughal darbar: entering the darbar and approaching the Guru Granth Sahib; prostrating oneself before the text and presenting an offering, and finally sitting down before a throne-like dais called a *palki* (palanquin) under the canopy of which the Guru Granth Sahib is placed on a *manji* while an attendant granthi waves a whisk over the sacred text.

It is in part for these reasons that Sikh tradition makes a series of underlying assertions in regard to the Guru's court, ones which may appear justified given the Persian Islamicate origins of Sikh courtly terminology, a vocabulary for example which includes certain key Sikh terms such as *khalsa* and *hukam* both of which had very strong Mughal court



*Guru Granth Sahib : the eternal Darbar.*

connotations. One of these assertions which most studies on courtly societies make is that the court was an extension of the state (and vice versa) and as such possessed a stature and all-India importance affecting the very direction of Indian history. Clearly this was not the case for a number of reasons. While the reach of the individuals who made up the Mughal court (including the emperor himself) was clearly vast, the Sikh court's sphere of influence was severely limited in many respects. Firstly, it could not affect or influence any non-Sikhs outside of its relatively small geo-graphical sphere even when one takes into consideration the institution of the masands and their followers and the various building projects undertaken by the Gurus, details to which we shall return (one could argue that its effect even within this singular domain was not overwhelmingly strong, a point to which tradition itself tacitly agrees in its attention to detractors such as Prithi Chand, Dhir Mal, and Ram Rai). Secondly, it was very much subject to the outside force of Indo-Timurid Mughal power, a fact of which Guru Arjan and his successors were most certainly cognizant and which was, moreover, made dramatically manifest in both the Mughal executions of Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur and in the Mughal attempt to decide the successor to the guruship in the late seventeenth century. The nobles and emperor who made up the Mughal court of course subject to no one and nothing outside of the

norms and etiquettes through which they themselves constructed their own subjectivity. It was through their own coherent forms of 'sociability' that their self-identity was formulated.

Despite the testimony of tradition, the Islamicate understanding of both the court and courtly culture on the part of Sikh poets and authors and indeed the Gurus should nevertheless elicit little surprise. The harsh tone towards most things Mughal that eighteenth-century Sikhs would adopt, demonstrates that it was the Persianised courts of the eastern Islamicate with which they and earlier Sikhs along with the greater part of northern India had been most familiar. This was by no means an intimate familiarity (it seems clear, for example that although seventeenth – and eighteenth-century Sikh writers may have had some passing acquaintance with such Mughal courtly phenomenon as 'devoted, familial hereditary service to the emperor' or *khanzadi* or just simply devoted service to the court and *javan-mardi* [lit. 'youngmanishness'] they were most certainly not privy to their detailed inner workings) but rather a more general awareness of the Mughal court based on second-hand reports and gossip and long residence within northern India. This was most likely supplemented in the late sixteenth century when Guru Arjan (and perhaps Guru Amar Das earlier and Bhai Gurdas later) had met with the emperor Akbar.





MANAS KI JAAT SABHE EK HI PEHCHAN LO -

## THE SIKH MODEL OF PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE

**I**n the fifteenth century, Guru Nanak laid the foundation of a plural society to liberate mankind confronted with religious intolerance, cultural disharmony and racial arrogance. Sikh Gurus, both at the ideational and institutional level, have delivered and practised an idea of pluralistic social order and urged for peaceful coexistence. The Divine hymns of Sikh Gurus, Sikh religious doctrines, the Sikh socio-religious institutions in general and institution of the Khalsa in particular are aimed at the creation of a new social order based on the spirit of love, mutual respect, harmony, tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

Sikhism is a social religion, non-ethnic, ecumenical, grounded in a just political society, directed and committed to propagation and establishing of a plural world society, which is tolerant, open, progressive and free in character. Sikhism favours a God oriented, non aggressive human society but firm and prepared to fight against rise and growth of evil through organised resistance, forward looking yet non-ambitious. The concept of social order as envisaged in Sikhism is essentially that of a fair, pluralistic and egalitarian society. The variety of cultural milieus of the peoples in various

parts of the world necessitates a pluralistic world society in which the positive, creative individualities of the constituent social units could co-exist and co-develop into an organic wholeness. Religious pluralism is an essential feature of such world society as envisioned by Sikhism.

Sikhism unites the people of various religious traditions into a broader unity. It can, therefore, be said that the holy Guru Granth Sahib is a precursor to the inter-faith movement. Sikh Gurus transcended all social barriers and boundaries to symbolise a humane version. By their hymns as well as by their actions, they demonstrated how interfaith understanding could be achieved, envisaging an ideal social structure wherein love and equality prevailed, human dignity respected and oppression replaced by justice mingled with compassion.

The essence of teachings of Sikh Gurus lies in their universal and eternal message of unity, love and peace. In Sikhism, the unity of God and the unity of mankind are intimately interlined. Sikhism advocates the spirit of Fatherhood of God, which has strength to create the sense of Brotherhood of Mankind and to promote everlasting peace in the world, which is facing various challenges like ethnic wars, cultural chaos, religious fanaticism and terrorism - all in the name of God.

The Sikh Gurus firmly believed that real spiritual life involves the acceptance and practice of the idea of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Mankind in one's actual living with stress that God pervades all hearts and one can attune oneself to Him and develop a new state of higher consciousness. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism said, "Amongst all there is light and that light (art Thou). By His light, the light shines within all the souls". Guru Amar Das, the third Nanak said, "The One (Lord) dwelling amongst all. (He is Unique) One is pervading everywhere." Guru Ram Das, the fourth Nanak said, "Amongst all Thou art contained and all meditate on Thee."

Guru Nanak and His successor Sikh Gurus established and nurtured socio-religious institutions such as *Sangat-Pangat*, *Daswandh*, *Guruship*, *Manji*, *Masand*, *Khalsa*, etc. with the clear purpose to educate and train the masses to follow the eternal message. These institutions were designed to inculcate and promote the spirit of goodwill and coexistence among the people who were divided on caste, colour, creed, race, etc.

Modern age has coined the ideas of democracy and egalitarianism. However, the very same concepts have always been deeply embedded in Sikh socio-religious thought. The composition of the Sikh Scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, is the best evidence of its democratic base free of any sectarianism in all matters. The Holy Scripture contains not only the hymns and songs of Sikh Gurus, but also those of Kabir, the Sufi saints, the Vaishnav *bhaktas* and other saints of the period. This strange but democratic spirit of tolerance and respect to the viewpoints of other religious saints is a unique phenomenon in the history of world religion. No other scripture of any religion in the world includes in itself the hymns of saints of any other religion. Such humane and brotherly attitude to people of other religions is pervades the entire history of Sikhism. Indeed Guru Tegh Bahadur, ninth Guru of the Sikhs, stood for and fought to defend the religious symbols of Kashmiri Pandits. It was an unprecedented heroic struggle for human rights in religious matters.

The Sikh Gurus wanted to create a classless and casteless society, wherein each individual enjoyed freedom of expression; observance and adherence to one's own religion, religious tolerance, social equality, where duties and rights were accorded equal importance. Adherence to one's religion and faith is natural but disrespect and intolerance to other religious faiths is certainly a sin. The ultimate configuration of the society, which the Sikh Gurus envisaged, was egalitarian, non-exploitative, non-discriminative, allowing human spirit to have full play, free from prejudices of caste, gender, wealth and birth, all its members steeped in full faith in the singularity and unity of God and in Fatherhood of God. To achieve this, they evolved suitable strategy, established requisite institutions to give practical shape to these ideas and also to preserve and perpetuate these.

Guru Nanak said, "From the One Lord all are born. The routes are many, but know that their Master is one." He also said, "He, who deems both the ways lead to one Lord, shall be emancipated." Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Nanak said, "One Lord is the Father of all and we are the children of One Lord. Thou, O Lord, art our Guru." He also said, "All are called partners in Thy grace. Thou art seen alien to none." Bhagat Kabir said, "Firstly God created light and then by His Omnipotence, made all the mortals. From the One light has welled up the entire universe. Then who is good and who is bad?"

Guru Nanak worked for a social order in which a human being is respected, because he is a human being and natural diversities do not stand in the way of human equality. Further, He wanted that the society of His dreams be free from religious moral, social, economic, political and administrative imbalances and inequities. Experience tells us that if people are able to smoothen such angularities the atmosphere becomes congenial for integration but there are some other conditions to be fulfilled if integration is to become a normal feature of day-to-day social life anywhere in the world. These conditions essentially are constant dialogue, common cultural bonds, common objectives and voluntary services.

Sikh Gurus worked for such a multicultural and pluralist society to attain the goal of peaceful coexistence. They denounced the man made sectarian and parochial divisions in the name of religion, race, caste, colour, sex etc. To them, the socio-cultural divisions and religious bigotry are the results of duality and create obstacles in the way of socio-spiritual development of humankind.

They denounced the age-old hierarchical structure of Hindu society and whose caste system prohibited vertical mobility among different caste groups. The discriminatory and exploitative character of this caste system had compartmentalised the socio-religious, political and economic structures. Guru Nanak severely criticised the Varan Ashram Dharma, which divided society into four fold divisions. Guru Nanak said, "What is in the power of caste? Righteousness is to be assayed. High caste pride is like poison by holding in hand and eating which the man dies." He said, "Preposterous is caste and vain the glory. The Lord alone gives shade to all the beings." He also said, "Recognise Lord's light within all and inquire not the caste, as there is no caste in the next world." Sikh Gurus worked to create a casteless, classless and equitable society. Guru Nanak said, "Nanak seeks the company of those who are of low caste among the lowly, nay rather the lowest of the low Why should he (he has no desire to) rival the lofty. Where the poor are looked after, there does reign the look of Thy grace, O' Lord."

Sikh Gurus not only criticised the caste system but also redefined the conception of superiority and inferiority. They rejected the false basis of higher and lower status of people based on birth in any

particular caste group. Those, who are meditating the One Supreme Being and serving mankind are superior ones. Contrary to this, those, who are moving on unrighteous path will be referred as inferior Guru Amar Das said, "Without the Name, everyone is of low caste and becomes the worm of ordure". Bhagat Kabir said, "The Hindu and the Muslims have the same One Lord." Guru Gobind Singh, tenth Nanak said, "Some call themselves Hindu, some Turk, some *Hafzi* and other *Imamsafi*. But entire mankind should be recognised as one."

Sikhs successfully created a society which was righteous and altruistic, as conceived by Guru Nanak Dev and completed by Guru Gobind Singh, creation of a society of true persons who are in the process to achieve perfection. The Sikhs believe in one God and His Fatherhood and consider all mankind as His children with faith in equality of all. Sikhs pray daily for welfare of entire mankind and also work for it. In the Sikh rule of law, there is no scope and no place of discrimination and they are enjoined to work for the God of All (*tere bhane sarbat da bhala*). The word *sarbat* leaves no choice for the Sikhs to discriminate either arbitrarily or rationally.

The Sikh doctrines preached by Guru Nanak fully blossomed into the concept of the Khalsa. The Khalsa is to be a closely-knit society of voluntary members and based on special qualifications, disposition and characters, pledged to make the Sikh way of life prevail, with the ultimate objective of establishing a plural, free, open, global society grounded in a universal culture. The order of the Khalsa is the first human society in the world-history, organised with the deliberate object of and pledged to bring about an ecumenical human society, grounded in a world-culture, which represents a free and organic fusion of the various strands of the spiritual heritage of Man.

The Fatherhood of God preached by Guru Nanak was the real Brotherhood of man recognised and established in practice by the Sikhs. Guru Gobind Singh in His time went further. On the introduction of the baptismal ceremony for the order of the Khalsa, he made the initiates drink the baptismal water (*amrit*) one after another from the same vessel in a double round the first man becoming the last in the second round. This practice forever abolished the distinction of high and low and place them on a plain of absolute equality.

Guru Gobind Singh gave the Khalsa the social ideal of equality: no distinction of birth, caste, class or colour. All are equal in social status, with the same rights and privileges. He thus enunciated a century earlier the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity that formed bedrock of the French Revolution. The five beloveds belonged to different communities of India, and hailed from different regions of the Indian sub-continent Daya Ram a Khatri from Lahore in the North; Dharam Das, a Jat from Delhi; Mohkam Chand, a washer man from Dwarka in the west; Himmat Rai, a cook from Jagannath in the East; and Sahib Chand, a barber from Bidar in the south.

He struck at the very root of evil by declaring that caste was an after growth in the Hindu social system and nobody could call himself a true Sikh if he did not give up the prejudice of caste and did not regard all his fellow Sikhs as his brothers. The four castes, he said, were like *pan*, *supari*, *chuna*, and *katha*, i.e., betel leaf, betel-nut, lime and catechu, none of which by itself could give ruddiness to the lips, strength to the teeth or relish to the tongue. He not only tried to make one caste out of four, but he went a step further and at once removed all unevenness of religious privileges to establish a theocratic democracy.

Guru Gobind Singh gathered the waves of the Ocean of Consciousness as the mother gathers the hair of the child. What is man but an ocean of consciousness? The Master washed hair, combed it and bound it in a knot as the vow of the future manhood which shall know no caste, no distinction between man and man, and which shall work for the peace and amity of spiritual brotherhood. He who wears his knot of hair is a brother of all men, freed of an ill-feeling of selfishness. The order of the Khalsa is selected on the basis



Illustration of Guru Nanak's encounter with Raja Shivnabh (from *Guru Nanak : His Life & Teachings*, by Roopinder Singh)

of ideology and strict psychological and character qualifications relating to disposition and behavior patterns, overriding geographical, racial and sex limitations pledged to establish a global society of human brotherhood.

It can be concluded that the Sikh Gurus firmly believed that unity of humankind is a prerequisite for social and spiritual development of an individual. They have dynamic and comprehensive vision of multicultural society in which all parochial concerns and narrow mindedness is swept away to establish a new harmonious and peaceful social order based on the unity of God, spirit of social equality, religious tolerance and respect for human dignity.

Prof Arvinder Singh

# Corporeal Metaphysics

## Guru Nanak in Early Sikh Art



Sikhism begins with Guru Nanak (1469–1539). Sikh identity, philosophical ideals, ethical precepts, and daily private and public worship are embedded in his sublime verse. Curiously though, his image does not occupy much significance, so much so that it is even prohibited in sacred precincts. For sure Sikhism is an iconic phenomenon: its theological singular Divine cannot be imaged; “it cannot be fashioned, it cannot be made” (*thapia na jae kita na hoe*), proclaimed Guru Nanak (GG5 2). The ten Gurus are not understood as divine incarnations. In part, this rejection of the visual reflects long-standing debates in the larger south Asian religious cultural world between the *sargun* and *nirgun*, the embrace of the material of this world (*gun*) in order to represent the divine versus its rejection. The latter stance also finds resonances with the Abrahamic injunction against divine representation found in Islamic contexts. Sikhism positions itself firmly, therefore, against the lavish practice of image worship (*murtis*) in the neighbouring Indic traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. According to SGPC (Shromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee) stipulations, images of Gurus should not to be displayed in the presence of their scripture. This prescription has been mirrored in the scholarship on the Sikh



Young Nanak with his teacher, composing the following :  
 "Make thy ink by burning up worldly attachments and pounding the  
 ashes to powder ; Let pure mind be thy prayer."

tradition, which has tended also to devalue or ignore the physical and the visual.

But the trepidation about the visual representation of the Gurus is unnecessary. At some level, this anxiety is a manifestation of what the feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz diagnoses as "somatophobia," caused, I would say in the Sikh instance, by the internalisation of centuries-old taboos against the body in patriarchal north India. Somatophobia exacerbated the binary between body/spirit, mind/body, material/transcendent, temporality/eternity, which the Sikh Gurus had repeatedly rejected. Their verse enshrined in the sacred canon celebrates the infinite transcendent within the palpable body, but because of some mental glitch, readers are unable to receive its empowering somatic currents. In the epigraph, we hear Guru Nanak say that the divine name (*nam*) is lodged (*nivas*) inside (*andar*) the body (*dehi*).

Clearly, any disregard or fear of the body goes against Nanak's word. It goes against Sikh ontology, and it even goes against the liturgical praxis, which acknowledges the sacred text as the physical body of the Gurus. This essay studies the painted illustrations of Guru Nanak from one of the early manuscripts, the B-40 Janamsakhi (dated 1733). I understand these

paintings to disrupt that somatophobia by their physical representation of Guru Nanak. My goal is to explore the cognitive and performative function of the Guru's body: what do we learn from his physicality, and what does that knowledge do to us in our own historical and social context?

Since they frequently set up a stage for his scriptural hymn, the Janamsakhis in fact disclose a symbiotic relationship between the biography of Nanak and his verse. Shortly after his passing away, mythic narratives (*sakhis*) about his birth and life (*janam*) began to circulate and have since been very popular in the collective Sikh imagination. They have come down in a variety of renditions such as the Bala, Miharban, Adi, and Puratan. Despite the personal loyalties and proclivities of their various authors, the Janamsakhis invariably underscore the importance and uniqueness of Guru Nanak's birth and life. Their quick and vigorous style lent itself easily to oral circulation and invited their visual rendering. Many of the narratives construct concrete scenes to contextualise Guru Nanak's universal message. Those that are illustrated evoke lingering emotions through their symphony of colors and compositional elements. According to the leading historian Hew McLeod, Sikh art had its genesis in these Janamsakhis.

To date, there are no extant portraits of Guru Nanak that would have been done during his lifetime, so we really do not know what he looked like. There is some mention of portraits made of his successors, but so far no authentic works have come to light. In spite of the fact that the B-40 Janamsakhi contains illustrations painted two centuries after the passing away of the founder Guru and could not have reproduced his exact features or complexion, the illustrations end up being a hidden treasure for both the community and the academy. In "Materialising Sikh Pasts," Anne Murphy convincingly argues that scholars need to shift their focus from textual and literary sources in order to rethink history and religion. The B-40 illustrations extend a visual element to the aural reception of Guru Nanak that I discussed in an earlier work: they render an exciting material quality to his theological and ethical message. As a feminist scholar of the Sikh tradition, I particularly want to examine how these illustrations (1) underscore the finite structures of Sikh metaphysics, (2) locate Guru Nanak within a plurality of bodies, (3)

reproduce a sensuous ontology, and (4) reveal the coalescence of poetry and physicality.

Gadamer's structural analysis of the "presence" evoked by pictures helps us comprehend the multivalent value of the B-40 illustrations. He explains that a picture is not just an image and definitely not a copy; its real nature "belongs to the present." Strategically located between a "sign" and a "symbol," a picture represents something "through itself, through the increment of meaning that it brings" to the spectator. When we see Guru Nanak located in the continuum of time and space, something actually happens: there is an existential encounter with the founder Guru at one's present point in life. The incremental meaning of Guru Nanak's human representation brings about a subjective grasp of core values of the Sikh tradition for the contemporary society and simultaneously shapes and crystallises them for future generations.

From a global perspective, the Sikh Guru interacting dynamically with diverse men, women, and transvestites in a culturally and religiously rich medieval India takes on a unique relevance in a body-disparaging, world-fleeing, we-them polarised society. From a historical perspective, these scenes provide an important documentation of the processes of early Sikh identity formation and construction. Though the Khalsa identity with the five external markers (known as the five 'k's *kesha* or uncut hair, *kangha* or comb, *kara* or steel bracelet, *kirpan* or sword, and *kaccha* or long underwear) given during the historic Basiakhi 1699 does not appear in the B-40 paintings, they do exhibit a strong awareness of religious identities in precolonial Punjab.

The symbolic indicators for 'Hindu' holy men are distinctly different from the 'Muslim' that Guru Nanak is seen conversing with, which should make us reassess the overemphasised role of the colonial machine in the construction of religious boundaries. They also expose the artist's predilections, for Guru Nanak looks more like the Muslim than the Hindu protagonists. And along with the global and the historical, these pictures have incremental value from a psychological perspective: the profound pleasure radiating from Guru Nanak's proximity with Muslim sages and companion Mardana could be very therapeutic for the Sikh-Muslim wounds incurred in the horrific Partition of the Punjab in 1947.

## Background

Named after its accession number at the India Office Library, the B-40 belongs to the small surviving collection of the early Janamsakhi manuscripts. The first extant Janamsakhi is the Bala, with twenty-nine illustrations dated to 1658 (owned by P N Kapoor of New Delhi). The next illustrated extant Janamsakhi collection has forty-two illustrations. It is dated to 1724 and is held by Bhayee Sikandar Singh of Bagrian in the Patiala district. The B-40 manuscript dated 1733 came nine years later. It was compiled by Daia Ram Baol at the request of the patron Sangu Mal, and its likely location is Kapurthala in the Punjab, which makes the B-40 geographically and historically close to the Bagrian collection. In fact, there is a striking stylistic likeness between them. The B-40 is considered to be very important because it has extensive historical documentation. It surfaced in Lahore in the nineteenth century and was acquired by the India Office Library in 1907. It has 239 folios, fifteen lines per page in Gurmukhi script, with rubrications in red ink. The name of the illustrator is Alam Chand Raj, which indicates his artisan background. The Raj Mistris (masons and bricklayers) along with the subcaste of Tarkhans (carpenters) have made distinctive contributions to Sikh art and architecture.

Wherever sizeable and influential communities developed, the familiar Janamsakhi stories were put in easily identifiable forms for them. These happened to be not only in the religious centres in the Punjab like Amritsar, Anandpur, Damdama, but also in Patna in Bihar, where the Tenth Guru was born, and in Nanded in Maharashtra, where he breathed his last. Patrons from these centres commissioned local artists and, consequently, numerous Janamsakhis were produced in different regions and at different periods.

This wide dispersion makes the dating and exact place of production difficult to determine for many of them. Nevertheless, it lends a fascinating variation. The first Guru is depicted in the Guler and Kangra styles of northern India, just as he is in the Eastern Murshidabadi or Southern Deccani styles.

The artists who painted him were also Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or Jain, and they presented the Sikh Guru through the lens of their respective religious beliefs. The stories they chose to paint depended on their personal interest, and much was contingent on their individual talent. The paintings from the



Guru Nanak in conversation with two Muslim holy men.  
Inscribed on verse are the words : 'Babaji Yuch Gaye,  
(Babaji went to Uchha')

family workshop of Nainsukh of Guler (1710–78) are especially lauded for their refined work. There are brilliantly subtle. In a classic example, we see Guru Nanak and his companions looking upon an ash-besmeared, scantily clad renunciate asleep on the ground. Through this double gaze upon a figure lying listless on an ochre-coloured cloth spread on a tiger skin, the utter futility of renunciation is brought home. The artist displays an ironic contrast not only between the oblivious sleeper and his wide-eyed audience, but also between his lifeless body and the dead tiger's lively tail that seems to curl up from behind. Despite the differences in style and choice of topics, there is a remarkable similarity among the various illustrators. A creased sheet filled with thumbnail sketches of seventy-four events in Guru Nanak's life has been discovered, proving the speculation of scholars that templates were in circulation. Though the sketches are extremely minimalist, each episode is numbered, and identified with a brief inscription in Persian and Gurmukhi characters. Such templates would have

been used by different groups of painters and scribes to portray Guru Nanak.

The B-40 manuscript features a vibrant style and content, which reflect quintessential Sikh ideals. For some reason, however, scholars have not been attracted to its style or to its wholesome perspective. BN Goswamy, who has done groundbreaking work in Sikh art and has offered exquisite analyses of some later Janamsakhis, dismisses the B-40 for its stylistic elements: "The much written about illustrated manuscript, popularly designated as the 'B-40 Janamsakhi' is painted in a prosaic, somewhat sterile, style. Surjit Hans, who pioneered their publication, introduces the illustrations in a typical dualistic framework of the "qualitatively different levels" of *lok* (world) and *paramarth* (transcendental reality). Hans's volume is greatly appreciated, but his fundamental presumption separates the material world from the transcendental reality—disrupting the corporeal ontology of these early Sikh paintings.

As a woman born into a Sikh home, I admit I miss some of my favourite episodes of Guru Nanak's biography in Alam's constellation. He omits scenes popular in oral transmission such as baby Nanak in the arms of his mother Tripta, a little boy playing with his older sister Nanaki, and a handsome man decked up to marry his bride Sulakhni. Especially endearing are the scenes with the Muslim midwife Daultan and sister Nanaki. Daultan is thrilled at the extraordinary qualities of the newborn Nanak she delivers; Nanaki influences her little brother with her love and companionship. The sister is painted in the Bagrian manuscript, which captures a tender moment of Nanak's visit with her (we see a flood of emotions as the siblings move to greet each other with their outstretched arms). The female protagonists in Guru Nanak's life receive their due attention in the series of forty paintings done by the twentieth-century artist Shrimati Phulan Rani for his fifth centennial (1969). Considering that the text of the B-40 account does not mention Daultan or even Nanaki (who is referred indirectly through her husband Jairam), their absence in Alam's illustrations is understandable.

When the Punjabi text names the artist, it uses the verb *likhna* (to write), so it equates painting with writing: "The figures [*surta*] are written [*likhia*] by Alam Chand Raj, the servant of the congregation" (*Surta likhia alam chand raj sangat de tehlie*). The



corporeal figures are perceived as a script, which writes out Sikh ideals and values. In the same vein, Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), a French painter, says, “just as the twenty-four letters of the alphabet are used to form our words and to express our thoughts, so the forms of the human body are used to express the various passions of the soul and to make visible what is in the mind.” Undoing dualistic perspectives that reduce it to non cognitive matter, these artists across cultures recognise the body as language itself. Spectators are urged to read it closely.

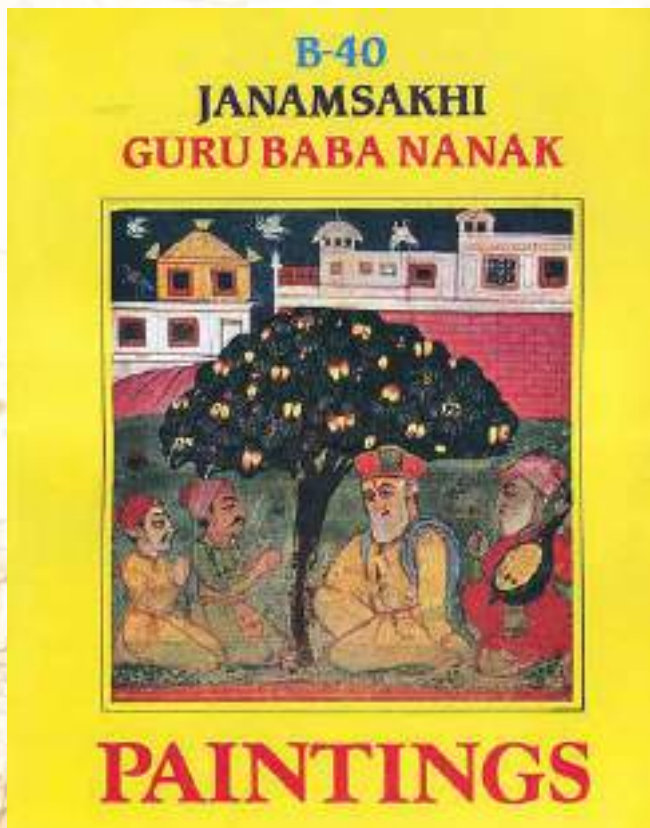
The illustrations of the B-40 are done in a stylistic fusion. Along with Alam’s strong Punjabi rural impulse, we can discern the free and imaginative Chaurapnachashika-style frequently employed to illustrate Jain and Hindu manuscripts and the charming folk art from the Rajasthani Malwa School, which was a major development in the history of Indian miniature paintings in fifteenth-century India. Alam uses decorative patterns with enormous effect in a wide spectrum of material and aerial colors. Gadamer’s theoretical speculations on art are brought to life in Alam’s work. Each painting in the B-40 “points by causing us to linger over it, for . . . its ontological valence consists in not being

absolutely different from what it represents but sharing in its being.”

In Gadamer’s hermeneutic framework, images are uniquely situated halfway between a sign (pointing-to-something) and a symbol (taking-the-place-of-something). As he explains, their aesthetic experience involves a shift in attention that causes the referential character of the sign to retreat into the background and present something more: “What is represented comes into its own in the picture. It experiences an increase in being.” Gadamer’s reflections incite us to access that “increase in being” produced by the dynamic intermediation between representing and presenting of Guru Nanak’s body.

On the one hand, the B-40 images indicate the historical, social, cultural, and political forces that played out in the biography of the first Sikh Guru; on the other, they evoke multivalent dimensions of meaning, presenting much more than what is represented, something infinite and unrepresentable. What Gadamer says about a picture in general applies to each of the B-40 Janamsakhi illustrations: the “original” is here, “more fully, more genuinely, just as it truly is.” Four vital themes of the Sikh religion now come into view.

Guru Nanak is introduced in a realistic manner. Seeing him so makes his words more accessible and concrete. Over the course of Alam’s fifty-seven paintings, he grows from a little boy to a teenager to a dark-bearded youth into the gray-bearded middle-age man and subsequently to a full white-bearded elderly man (Baba). Guru Nanak’s physical growth is a sign of an organic and authentic mode of existence in this temporal world. Whether dark, gray, or white, his beard is spherical, and as it combines with his roundish turban, it renders an overall softness to his features. The sequence begins with a seven year-old going to school and ends with his preparation for his crematory ritual. During the course of his life, he communes with nature, gets terribly sick, leaves home, and travels with his Muslim companion Mardana to places far beyond the Punjab, meeting holy men from diverse religious backgrounds. At midpoint, he has a revelation of the singular Divine and continues to share his mystical experience. Toward the end of his life, he passes succession to his disciple Lahina, absorbing him into his own self and renaming him Angad (a limb of his body). In colours and vivid stage settings, we follow his biography and see him





*An adolescent Nanak meets sadhus of the Nirbani sect. He later used up the money given to him by his father for trade to feed the hungry sadhus.*

enacting his Divine passion and universal vision in this world. For the spectators, the Guru's relaxed body communicates ease and comfort in their own bodies and with all those around them.

Throughout, Guru Nanak is depicted in the most normal way: he is not too tall, nor too large, and does not occupy any more space than anybody else. I disagree with the observation that "the area covered by Guru Nanak is always more than any other person." Guru Nanak's appearance is a validation and affirmation of the natural human body. The Guru is usually seated or standing on the same plane as other people in common open-air settings. Neither in his youth nor at a later stage do we witness any exaggerated signs of herculean muscle. Missing also are the markers of sovereignty with which later painters have depicted Guru Nanak—a halo around him or a devotee attending reverently to him with a fly whisk. Other saintly iconographic clichés like the water pot (*kamandalu*) by his side, an armrest (*bairangan*) under his left arm, or a book in his hand or in front of him are also missing in the B-40 Janamsakhi renditions. These early paintings do not rely on such

external deployments. With their colours, space, perspective, and gestures, Alam's compositions subtly reveal Guru Nanak as a dynamic intersection between a historical person and timeless reality.

In the entire collection, the Guru is the only figure in a three-quarter-view perspective. With the exception of Bhagat Kabir and an occasional male or female belonging to a cluster (perhaps to create an artistic variation within the group?), Alam's protagonists are in profile. Without overpowering us with the Guru's frontality, he produces a unique perspective of Guru Nanak as a three-dimensional figure. Guru Nanak's simple pose, whether standing, sitting, or lying down, and his gentle gestures, addressing people from various strata of society and personal orientation, spell out his intrinsic sensitivity and strength. As we see robbers and demons and religious leaders bow before him, we can feel tremendous force exuding from this sage like reservoir of spiritual wisdom and personal peace. He fights no battles. He shows no anger. He is not dramatic. No matter what the setting may be, there is a perpetual calm and at-homeness in the world about him. Most often there is a lush tree above and, beside him, in



*Guru Nanak Dev Ji on his Udassi.  
Original grey monochromatic painting by Kanwar Singh Dhillon, Toronto*

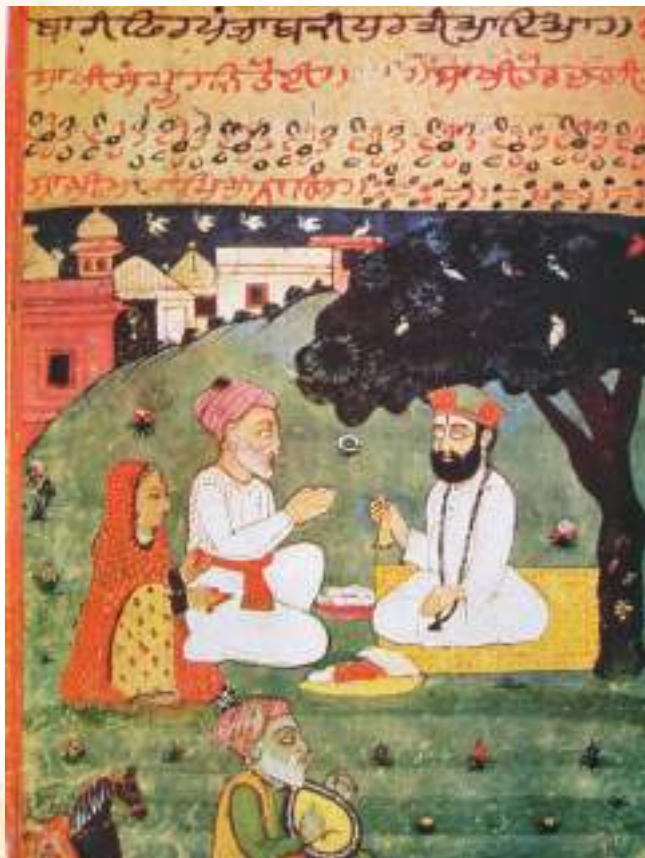
simple profile view, his Muslim companion, the musician Mardana playing his rebec. Guru Nanak's proximity with Islam and melodious vibrations is important to the artist, and they are effectively conveyed.

Alam utilises Guru Nanak's attire as another marker of his spiritual identity. Again, his clothes may not be fancy in their fabric, but their design discloses his respect for his own body and elicits the same response from his viewers. In fact, the very first illustration tellingly establishes his inner authority and self-assurance. The little boy on his first day at school wears a yellow full-sleeved robe coming down to his ankles, with an elegant reddish sash neatly tied around his waist and a matching turban over his head. The *chooridar* (literally 'bracelet forming') trousers peep out from below his robe, as do his curly locks from the turban on either side of his face. It is a most endearing portrait. Guru Nanak's formal dress and upright demeanour are markedly different from the rest of the kids who are meagerly dressed and romping around. The turban customarily donned by Mughal princes, Sufi saints, and Rajput nobility imparts to Guru Nanak a maturity beyond his years. He confidently greets his mustached teacher dressed in the typical upper-caste Brahmin outfit of a pleated dhoti tucked around his waist with one end draping from his right shoulder down his bare chest. Caught at the threshold between 'home' and 'society'—behind him stands his father and across sits his teacher on a pedestal with food and books—little Nanak displays phenomenal dignity.

Though the colour of his robe changes from a golden yellow sometimes to white or blue, triggering change in the other colour combinations, the red and green turban with yellow designs remains the same. The only exception is the white and black rather "postmodern" outfit. Unlike his other harmoniously flowing robes, this is short and half sleeved; its black shirt has a V-neck with double white stripes at the trim that cut across Guru Nanak's chest. From the waist down to his knees is a dhoti like white outfit. Self-referential in its style to begin with, the stark black and white contrast is jarring to the eyes, and the sweeping diagonals spell a sense of fragmentation. What makes Guru Nanak's outfit even odder is that, in this case, the text describes him wearing a heavy, long, loose, brown-coloured shirt, with a shawl around him, and sashes.

His wide sash (*kamarband*) in number 1 is quickly replaced by a narrower and simpler version, more in tune with his normal everyday routine. It is quite likely that the artist wanted to convey the pride of parents who decked their only son with that ornamental sash for his first day at school. As he grows up, the style of his turban alters as well: the canonical shape in the first few pictures gives way to a roundish headgear, resembling that of Sufi sages. Except when he is ill or is bathing himself, Guru Nanak always has his turban on.

And except when he is asleep or bathes, the Guru is invariably fully clothed. Thus, he appears as an antithesis to several of his scantily dressed and shaven-head Yogi and Nath contemporaries. As a sign of mastering their sexuality or the death of their bodies, ascetics from different religious traditions opted to wear little on their bodies, and many smeared themselves with ash. When Alam shows Guru Nanak's robes flowing down to his ankles, they make the strips tightly covering the genitals of the mendicants beside him appear even skimpier. The example of the Digambara Jains, who for centuries have literally been 'skyclad,' is loudly denounced in Sikh scripture.



Not those “who take off their clothes and go naked like Digambaras” (GGS, 1169), but she who “wears the clothes of Love” (GGS, 54) is prized. The Guru’s turban and robe are signs of his bodily sensations and active participation in the normal routine of life. His colourful outfits painted by Alam materially substantiate the textual verse: rather than “smear the bodies with ashes, renounce clothes, and go naked.” (*tani bhasam lagai bastar chodhi tani naganu bhaia*) (GGS, 1127). We must “wear the outfit of divine honour and never go naked” (*painana rakhi pati pamesur phir nage nahi thivana*) (GG, 1019).

At times, Guru Nanak wears Punjabi *jutti*-style shoes, and quite attractive ones, too. His black *juttis* with white daisies are especially noteworthy. The Sikh Guru is very much in sync with the cultural trends and mores of his time. Overall, Guru Nanak’s appearance and gear reveal his affirmation of being in this world. These outward modes express his care and cultivation of his self within a sociopolitical context. Guru Nanak is not some static representation belonging to eternity; from his childhood to old age, we see a lively participant engaging meaningfully within the fluctuations of time.

As Alam illustrates, the Sikh Guru traveling to distant places and meeting with people of different faiths and ethnicities shows the human body in its rich diversity. Over and again, we encounter Guru Nanak engaged in discourse with important historical figures popular in the Punjab, such as Shah Abdul Rahman, Hajji Rattan, Sheikh Braham, Bhagat Kabir, Gorakhnath, and Sheikh Sharaf. He meets with many other Sufis, Saints, Siddhas, Naths, and with Kala, the god of death, as well. In his attempt to reproduce the Janamsakhi thrust, the artist depicts Guru Nanak as a genuine pluralist who does not simply accept or tolerate diversity but courageously reaches out to others.

In his encounters, there is no impulse to convert, and there is no acrimony toward other religious leaders. Mutual respect and joy come through in the paintings, as though the discussants seated serenely were discovering some exciting new horizon. Alam’s brushstrokes transmit the Guru’s corporeality as the force that intensifies everybody he meets. If we see Shah Abdul Rahman sitting with him in a rosy pink outfit amid flora and fauna, it is because the Sufi saint has absorbed Guru Nanak’s radiance. According to the Janamsakhi text, when Shah Abdul Rahman’s

disciple comments on his flushed body, the saint replies: “Today I met with Khuda’s ruby” (*Ajju khudai ka lalmilia*) (B-40, 43–44). The term ‘lal’ denotes the color red or radiance or ruby or a lover. The encounter is complex: there is the initial seeing, which produces an immediate insight into the Sikh Guru as a radiance/lover/ruby of Khuda for the Muslim saint, transforming him into a passionate pink. That the body is the cause, the medium, and the result of their cognitive and spiritual experience is as effectively expressed as the Cartesian dualism is erased.

Other cross-religious encounters would be more difficult for the artist to present on his canvas. According to the Janamsakhi narratives, when the pluralist Guru Nanak met with people, he urged them to be self-critical so they would know about and live in tune with the fundamentals of their respective religion. Alam tries to relay this message in number 13 where he portrays the Muslim saint Shah Rukandi sitting at the entry of a square structure while the Guru faces him. The architectural configuration with arabesques indicates its Islamic origins, but its darkness, against which Shah Rukandi is seated in a sapphire blue robe with floral designs, renders a hidden interiority. The contrast could be Alam’s painterly attempt to write out Guru Nanak’s message that the saint be fully enlightened about his Islamic background and integrate his interior self with his exterior self.

Some scenes, like the Guru meeting Hajji Rattan in number 14 (a very popular saint in the Bathinda region of the Punjab), would be impossible to depict materially. How could Alam ever paint the literary trope of “water merging with water”? At times, one wishes that he had been more literal in his visual translation, for when Guru Nanak meets with Sheikh Braham: “Then they kissed each other’s hand and sat down” (*Tab in uno dast bosi kar kai bahi gae*) (B-40, 66). Instead of zooming in on their exchange of kiss, which would have been relatively easy to depict, Alam shows the two spiritual figures seated together amid the sounds of Mardana’s music and the sight of the birds flying around. So no matter what, through his bright colours and simple designs, Alam consistently succeeds in creating a joyous mood that replays the pleasures and corporeal sensations of the Sikh Guru’s encounter with Muslim saints.

His illustration of the Guru with Bhagat Kabir, the leading Nirguna Sant of northern India, evokes quite a different aesthetic. Rather than the surroundings of

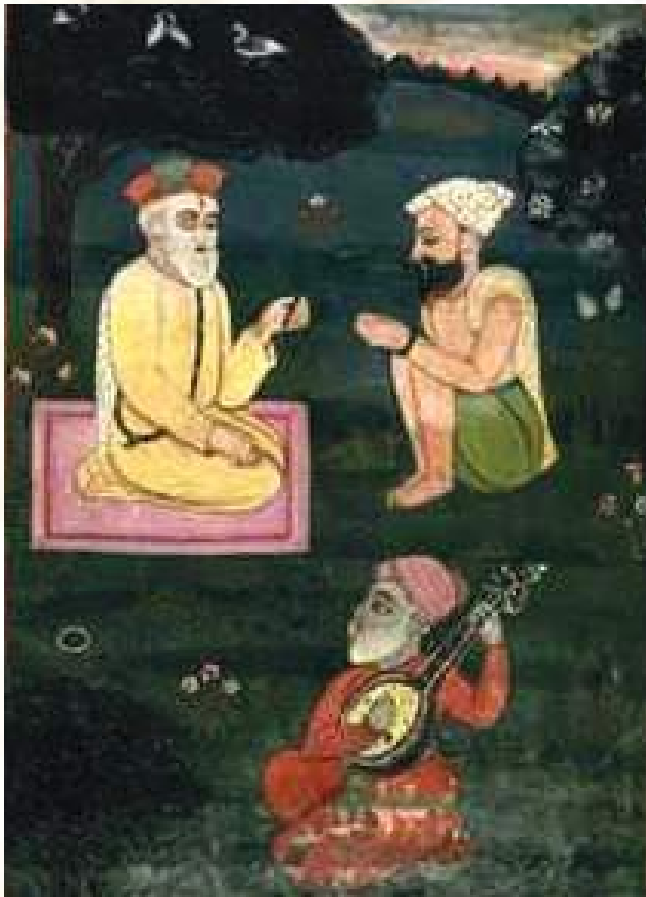
nature, the two figures in this composition are much larger. Both are sitting on par with each other. Unlike the Muslim saints who wore different shades of blue (with the exception of Shah Abdul Rahman in pink), Bhagat Kabir is dressed in dazzling silver white. Does the artist intend to signify his *sattva* qualities? The Guru, is in golden yellow. Both are in three-quarter profile. Both must be around the same age, for Bhagat Kabir's white mustache (no beard, whereas the Sufi saints invariably are portrayed with beards) parallels the Guru's white beard. Bhagat Kabir commands great respect, especially with the mysterious whiteness around his eyes. Nevertheless, his face bent downward with his slanting mustache implies the Bhagat's deference toward the Guru, who faces him straight across. Mardana, from the lower left of the composition, has his neck stretched up and eyes wide open to look at the figure quietly dominating the scene. The aim of the Janamsakhis is to portray the greatness of Guru Nanak, and as they do so, they fully project the respect and affection Guru Nanak has for other religious figures. Alam accomplishes their objective through his simple yet subtle language of the body.

He also portrays Guru Nanak traveling hazardous terrains to meet and visit holy people and their sacred places in Kashmir, Achal Batala, Mecca, and Baghdad. Guru Nanak's geographical journeys parallel his inner search. There is a curiosity in him to know about the foreign and familiarise himself with the distant, the other. Guru Nanak is also pictured with Nath yogis sitting on top of Mount Sumeru. Their shaved heads, lengthened earlobes, and long earrings (*kan-phot*, "ear split") signal their rigorous Hatha yoga practices and ascetic ideals. These figures impressed the medieval Indian imagination, for they are widely present in the art and literature of the Muslims too. A memorable scene from a Mughal album on exhibit at the Chester Beatty has a Kanphat yogi sitting with a dog, its devotion to his master being analogous to the yogi's for Shiva. In the B-40 illustrations, we do not get the sense of the Kanphat yogis as the exotic 'others'; rather, they appear as significant holy men with whom Guru Nanak seeks to engage in serious conversation. In Alam's composition, the group of shaven-headed yogis is sitting securely together, while the Guru is on the side, standing on the edge of the mountain, accompanied only by Mardana. A dark-bearded Guru Nanak has almost made it to the mountaintop. Even in his precarious locus, the young itinerant seems to have resolved to enter into the circle of these venerable

Naths. Alam brings home the point that pluralistic ventures require tremendous courage and initiative; it is not easy to enter into somebody else's ideological and geographical space.

In number 46, Alam shows Guru Nanak interacting with a group of ascetics who appear to have a different lifestyle, corporeal insignnia, and spiritual practices from the Nath. They too are 'outside' society, but they are longhaired, they have buns atop their heads, they have long flowing beards, and some can be seen entering a body of water. The text describes the water in this Himalayan region as icy cold, with many of the ascetics dying after being dipped into it. To borrow the term from religious studies scholar Patrick Olivelle, these ascetics are engaged in the process of "deconstructing" their bodies. The visiting Guru miraculously makes the water pleasantly lukewarm so the sanyasis can comfortably bathe themselves, and with his cupped hands gives out rice, ghee, and sugar to feed their famished bodies. Instead of deconstructing, Guru Nanak urges them to nurture their bodies and participate in the natural, social, and cosmic processes. What is particularly interesting in Alam's rendition is the presence of a female sitting next to a male sanyasi across from Guru Nanak. The Janamsakhi text does not mention any woman. Seeing her wholesome figure on Alam's canvas—with her long hair coming down to her waist, dressed in a pink garment and pretty earrings, and holding a *mala* in her hands joined together in emotional and spiritual energy—reinforces Nanak's emphasis on the corporeal richness of human existence.

In yet another illustration, Guru Nanak is seen with yet another type of ascetics, the *fakirs* who go begging for food. This composition is vertically split in two segments. In the upper, Guru Nanak is seated in his typical pose under a tree, with Mardana across from him playing the *rebab*. But close behind the Guru is a group of men crouched together, and as these four disappear into the border, they leave the spectator with the sense that there are many more of them. In the lower perspective is a very different set of bodies. There are two musicians elegantly dressed in long robes and sashes standing on either side of the frame; one holds the *rebab*, and the other the cymbals. Between them are two distinctive figures in pajama-trousers (not *chooridars*) dominating the scene. Their youthful chests are bare, and they have narrow



bands wrapped around their heads. They occupy extensive space as they flaunt their robust bodies in vigorous dance, with their arms excitedly in the air. Holding these two scenes together is a mosque in the far background, and in spite of the distance, its four minarets are clearly visible.

The narrative is about the Guru in Saidpur, where the Pathans are celebrating merrily at a wedding party, utterly oblivious to the group of starving *fakirs* beside the Guru. Babur had sacked the town of Saidpur when he crossed the river Indus in 1520 (it was subsequently rebuilt by Akbar and renamed Eminabad). The Janamsakhi sets up the context for Guru Nanak's hymn in which he bitterly twists the metaphor of a wedding procession to describe Babur's brutal incursion that destroyed the Muslim Lodi Sultans, along with the Hindu and Muslim masses (GGS, 722). (Babur, in his autobiography, recounts his procession of warriors coming down from Afghanistan in a wedding-like festive mood as well.) Alam's painting poignantly catches the contrast between the local victims feebly huddled with the Guru and the ethnically and socially superior foreign

victors from the North-West Frontier and Afghanistan region engrossed in song and dance. Along with the visual, there are sonic differences: while Mardana's rebab raises empathy and human connections, the rebab and cymbals in the lower frame promote selfish indulgence. That the Guru's melodious word connected people across religions, cultures, professions, and societal hegemonies is the central message of the Janamsakhi text.

Its penultimate sentence is a breathless account of the variety of men and women who are attracted to Guru Nanak's rhyme and rejoice in his presence: "Hindus, Muslims, *yogis*, *sanyasis*, *brahmcharis*, ascetics, ascetic leaders, skylad Jains, Vaishnavas, celibates, householders, wandering mendicants, nobles, chiefs, aristocrats, officials, agriculturalists, proprietors" (*Hindu musulman jogi sanyasi brahmchari tapi tapisaru digambar baisno udasi grihasti bairagi khan khaneen umrao karori jimindaru bhumia*). The way Alam paints the group of wandering ascetics—two quite dark-skinned and two quite light—all of them so closely nestled to the Sikh Guru, touchingly conveys the textual theme of the plurality of 'bodies' drawn to Guru Nanak. Viewers are left with the hope that the resounding melodies from Mardana's rebab will reach the dancers and make them aware of the plight of others.

Another intriguing illustration is that of Guru Nanak in conversation with the Sufi Sheikh Sharaf. This celebrated figure in the Punjab lived two centuries before Guru Nanak. In Alam's painting, he is a young black-bearded saint ornately dressed like a woman with all her feminine accouterment. In both content and form, it is a fascinating scene.



The background with single, double-storied, and some even triple-storied buildings, and a fluted dome reaching up into the skies, gives the impression of an urbanised Muslim town (identified as Baghdad in the text). The balconies and windows are intricately latticed, and the walls are decorated with colorful arabesques.

On a closer look, we get a side view of a mosque set in a compound with its entrance opening up to the right. Its latticed window repeats the pattern of those far in the distance, exhibiting the genius of Islamic art—the conversion of stone into lace. With the dome of the mosque receding into the left horizon and the branches of a vibrant bush across from it into the right, the eye is left wandering beyond both borders. This bush in the compound of the mosque has been rendered realistically, for we can spot eight different birds sitting in a circle on its distinct branches and leaves. Quite unfamiliar in Alam's repertoire of abstract foliage, it immediately evokes the proverbial Conference of the Birds painting by the Muslim mystic Farid ud-Din Attar. Rows of tiny shrubs, brownish-pink rocks, and sprightly flowers run parallel to the mosque and the discoursing birds.

Against this backdrop charged with Islamic aesthetics, the blue-robed Guru and the bride like bearded Sufi are having their own discourse. They are sitting across from each other on their knees on the green grass. The bridal image has of course been a popular literary trope on the Indian subcontinent. The male Sufis, Bhagats and Sikh Gurus have abundantly appropriated the feminine tone, psyche, and syntax to express their spiritual yearning. So pervasive is this motif that in Indian Sufism, the male devotee in classical Persian Sufi literature is recast as a female. But to literally see that poetic motif is quite something else. By choosing to paint the narrative of a transvestite with the outward signifiers of feminine embellishment, clothing, and jewels, Alam boldly questions socially constructed gender paradigms.

The B-40 text specifies that Sheikh Sharaf is wearing the conventional 'sixteen' adornments, including henna, black collyrium in his eyes, and fancy garments, all very visible to the naked eye. Others like bathing, anointing with sandalwood, and eating pan among the conventional 'sixteen' can only be assumed. What is strikingly visible in Alam's scene is the jewelry bedecking the saint's body. Drawing upon the useful *Ain I Akbari*, the

detailed sixteenth century record of Emperor Akbar's reign by his Prime Minister Abul Fazl-I-Allami, we can identify quite a few items. There is the marigold-shaped binduli ornament on the Sheikh's forehead, the pearl mang worn in the parting of his dark hair, and the marigold (matching the forehead ornament) *karnphul* (ear flower) as a part of the pearl *khuntial* (earring tapering in shape). Around his neck is the guluband, a choker consisting of several rose-shaped buttons of gold strung onto silk, and the har, a necklace of strings of pearls that glides down to his waist. His arm is full of bracelets, but Abul Fazl's distinctions between the *kangan* (bracelet), the *gajrah* (bracelet made of gold and pearls), and the *chur* (bracelet worn above the wrist) are hard to make. The Sheikh's crimson scarf embracing his bearded face and upper body is drawn back just enough to show his elaborate ornaments.

His image may disturb some, but the Guru is utterly unruffled. Actually nothing seems out of joint in this picture. The live marigolds and daisies are reproduced on the Sheikh's scarf and jewelry, creating an intimacy between his embodied self and surrounding nature. As the two figures face each other, the rosary in the Guru's stretched hand appears right in the middle. This rhythmic circle of beads horizontally reaches out to unite them, as well as vertically to the three rose like flowers and higher to the five daisies and still higher up to the mosque and finally to the houses and buildings in the distance. The overflowing artistic rhythm and the lack of anxiety on the Guru's face visually spell out the textual question: "Baba asked the Sheikh, what is all this dressing up for?" (*Babe puchia sekha eh kia saag kita hi*). Alam's illustration is fraught with the issues of sex and gender. Did the Sheikh see himself as a woman? Was his notion of the self in fact feminine? Was he simply following a prescribed gender ideology or was the Sufi saint in touch with his unique individuality? According to the text, the saint replies that he wanted to please God and did whatever he could to win him. The Guru then instructs that the Divine is won only with truth and adoring love. He does not put down the Sheikh for cross-dressing. In fact, he invites him to sing ghazals, for which he was renowned, and the Sheikh acquiesces by singing beautifully on the theme of love. The Guru looks upon him, and as the story ends, the saint's agony is transformed into bliss.



Especially interesting is that Sheikh Sharaf, like Shah Abdul Rahman, palpably feels the impact of Guru Nanak's sight: "With Babaji's look upon him, the Sheikh's sight turned divine. His every pore became ecstatic. Inside every outfit, behind every burqa, he saw the Divine!" (*Babeji di najari bhar dekhne nal sekh tai drib drist hoi gai / rom rom daru divaru masatu hoi gaia / hari jame andar har burqe andar brahm hi paia najar avai*). The terms jama and burqa evoke the human body and bring to mind figures of jama-wearing men and burqa-wearing women. Physically touched by Guru Nanak's visual pulsations, each and every hair of the Sufi saint literally stands erect in joy, and he begins to see the metaphysical Being in every corporeal figure.

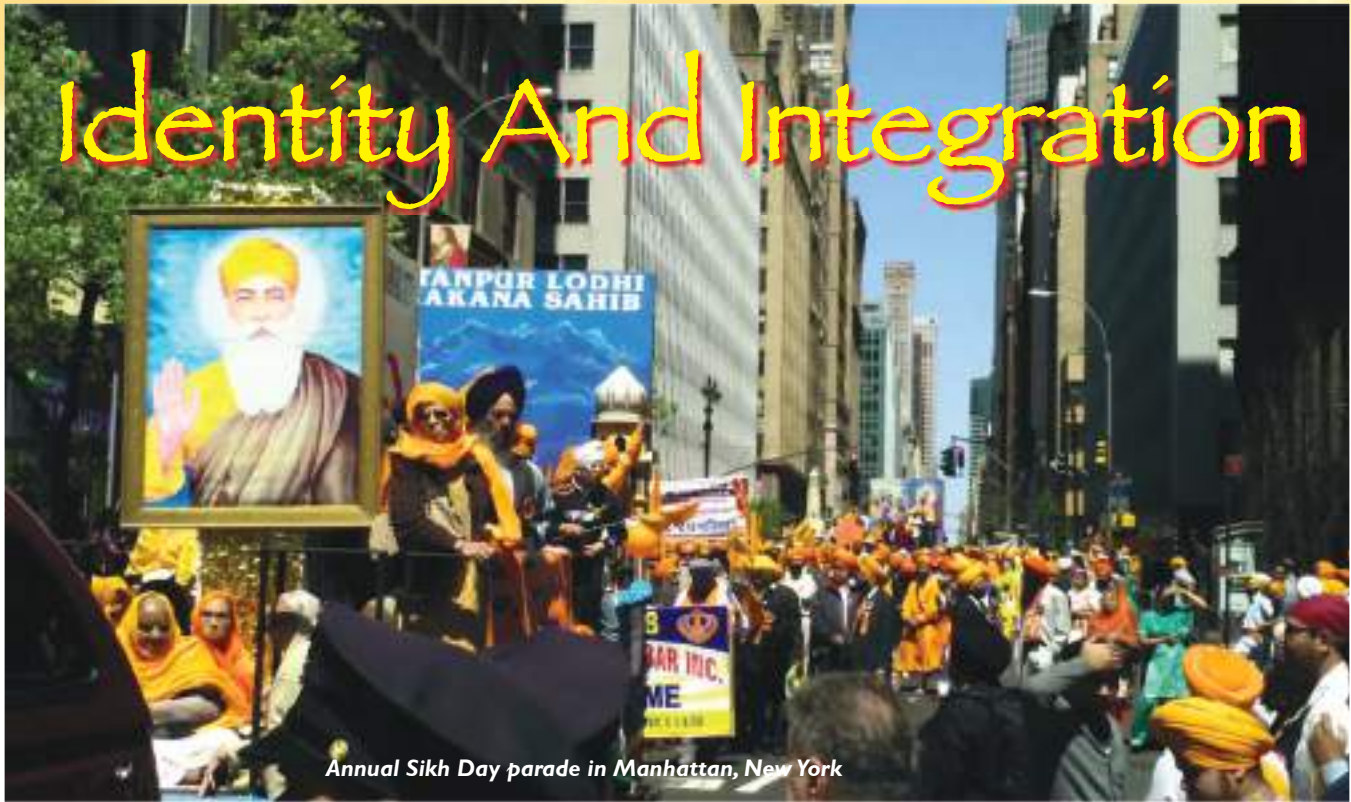
That there be total synchronicity between the internal self and the external self is the moral of the narrative, both in the text and in Alam's perceptive pictorial rendition. Without the experience of

authentic selfhood wearing too little or too much, dressing up in the masculine garb or in the feminine is utterly futile. Dressed in tune with his psychological being, Guru Nanak brings attention to the human body. In his words cited both in the B-40 Janamsakhi and in the Guru Granth, the colour red is the colour of passion for the divine name, white is the colour of truth and charity, and blue removes the stain of falsehood. The Guru even defines the robe he wears as being stitched with devotion, and the texture of the sash tied around him as spiritual contentment (GGS, 16). Alam triumphs in illustrating the Guru's garments and accessories as sensuous appearances of his emotional and spiritual values. In turn, spectators are challenged to think about their subjectivity. Do we simply follow conventional prescriptions? Are we enslaved to glossy fashion advertisements? [To be continued]

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh



# Identity And Integration



*Annual Sikh Day parade in Manhattan, New York*

This happened five or six years ago. A group of new immigrants, primarily Asians decided to hold a parade in the streets of New York to celebrate, showcase and highlight the diversity of New York. The organising committee was understandably 'dominated' by new immigrants from China, Korea, Philippines, India and Pakistan since these are the new Americans. The Mayor, perhaps even the Governor might attend. What better way for our neighbors to learn about us. So far so good.

Problems soon surfaced, particularly with the Indians in the group. They wanted to parade as they would in India. They wanted a reviewing stand, with a politician from India on it or, failing that, an Indian film star or at least the Indian Ambassador or the Consul General. It would make good copy back home and a great opportunity for being seen and photographed with the people considered important, particularly in India. They also insisted that all immigrants of Indian descent march behind the flag of India.

At this all hell broke loose. Since this was after the invasion of the Golden Temple in 1984 by the Indian army, most Sikhs were reluctant to give any recognition to a symbol of India or to any representatives of its government. Most Muslims and

Kashmiris were similarly disposed, being equally bitter with the Indian government. The Sikhs wanted to march, but leading them would be the saffron flag of the Sikhs. Most Hindus however, were adamant; if you refused to honour the Indian politicians or march under the Indian flag, that was prima facie evidence that you were a traitor to India.

Unwisely, the Indian Consul General stuck his nose where it did not belong. The consular officials started coming to the organisational meetings of the Indian contingent. Quickly, at their instigation passions were aroused, the Sikhs and Muslims were branded unpatriotic and anti-Indian. The Indian government officials fueled the fire but nobody asked if it was right for them to interfere in the internal affairs of these people, many of whom were no longer citizens of India. The largely Hindu Indian immigrant throng, true to the Indian cultural proclivity for obsequiousness, catered to the controlling influence of the consular officials.

I had been in America over a quarter of a century by then and my ties to the old country were not all that strong. I had been watching the imbroglio with cool amusement and calm detachment, quite sure that it wasn't going to become my problem.



*'Panj Pyare' lead the parade in New York*



*Elegance and dignity*

Oddly, the same night I got telephone calls from both Hindus and Sikhs soliciting my opinion and support for their respective positions. That set me thinking.

India, like the United States, is a political entity. It seems to me therefore, that the only political flag that should be displayed on the streets of an American city would be that of this country. I recognise that when a head of state of another country is visiting, the flag of that country would be displayed. But those are special circumstances. My political loyalty and identification is now American, not Indian, though culturally my roots remain Indian. I could love India's cuisine, its music and philosophy, even its people, yet I vote here, not in India. To visit India, I need special permission in the form of a visa from the Indian government, just like any other non-Indian. And that permission may be denied by some functionary of the Indian government without reason, as happens often enough to enough people.

The United States is a diverse country, a mosaic of the many cultures that have come here. In fact this country's vitality and strength flow from its diversity. I can see a celebration of that diversity. I can see groups marching behind the banners of their cultural, religious or even geographic affiliations, but not those of political entities.

My views are further strengthened when I think about many of the other immigrants who have stronger differences with the governments of their native countries. Under what banner would the Cuban immigrants march? Certainly not that of the present day Cuba exemplified by Castro. The aegis of the deposed Batista's people would be equally repugnant and out of the question. Would Palestinians from the occupied territories agree to march as Israelis with an Israeli politician on the reviewing stand? When this incident happened, East Germany was a separate country and the Soviet Union was the big bad wolf. What would happen to immigrants from those countries? The list is endless.



*Langar in New York*

One has to remember that many immigrants who chose America did so out of political necessity. They were survivors, victims of their own governments; whereas, many Indians had come here in search of the economic pot of gold.

**In the past five years or so, many Sikhs have left India to escape that government's repressive policies and torture and have been granted political asylum here.**

In addition, there are Sikhs who were born and raised in Burma, Kenya, Great Britain or this country. Many of them have never even been to India. They feel no kinship with India the political entity, but can and do relate to that culture, music, language and cuisine to a varying extent. Certainly, they cannot identify with the flag of India, but only with its religious and cultural organisations.

It seems to me self evident that under no circumstance, should the representatives of the erstwhile country of an immigrant group be welcome

either at the organisational stage or later during the parade on a reviewing stand. They could, if they wish take their place along with the crowds we all hoped would be there.

That was my logic and I proclaimed it clearly and publicly. The hate mail from my Hindu friends surprised me. One Hindu colleague stopped speaking to me and did not resume amicable conversation until three years later. One Hindu patient and his family walked out of my office, to return a month later. Unknown Indian-accented voices left obscene messages on my answering machine. This was not new to me — I had seen it after I said some frank things at Indira Gandhi's assassination. But it hurt, nevertheless.

Finally came the icing on the cake. A kind friend arranged a dinner meeting with the Indian Consul General. I had no problem with that. There were four of us Sikhs — professors of Mathematics and of English, a physician and myself— to engage the Consul General in a discussion. I remember that the food was excellent, the discussion a disaster. I

cannot imagine a more confined and limited mind than that of the Consul. I could not help but pity India — a country so richly endowed in nature and talent and so poorly served by its bureaucrats and politicians.

The Consul was of one fixed mind — all Sikhs, no matter where they were born and raised, or whatever their political loyalty, affiliation or feeling, must march behind the flag of India. According to him, for Sikhs to display the flag of their religion in New York in preference to that of India would be a gross insult to India. It would be high treason. At the most he could allow both the Indian and the Sikh flags as long as we observed that, in his words, "a country's political flag must outrank that of a religion and must fly higher, or be ahead in a procession." We reminded him that the Sikh flag had been at the head of many processions in India, and many Indian politicians had marched behind it and there was no national flag alongside or ahead of it. In the forty years that India had been independent, no government had pro-pounded the view that the Sikh flag was unacceptable. The more we talked, the angrier he became. He was an observing Christian. Finally in desperation, I suggested that the next time he was in St. Patrick's Cathedral he should look up and notice if he saw one flag or two, and if that of the Church was any lower than that of the State. The result was not quite what we expected. He sputtered, turned all shades of the spectrum, pronounced the meeting useless and ended it.

It is many years now and many a Consul General have come and gone, but I still wonder about the incident.

We who come from India remain primarily Indian in outlook and in many parts of our being, even though we change in many ways and live here for the better part of a lifetime. This is not so unusual in first generation immigrants no matter where they come from. The cultural affinities are in the marrow of our bones, not easily shattered, nor is there any reason that they should. As I said, the richness of this country depends upon the ideas and the heritage that we and other immigrants like us have brought. Our children will have more of the American cultural traditions grafted on to their Indian roots than us, and this process will continue unabated from generation to generation. Every new generation of immigrants has brought a rich heritage which has found a unique

niche, however small, in the complex mosaic of this society such that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

When I look at our new immigrant Sikhs here (in the USA), I reckon that in some things we need to define more common ground with others from India and Pakistan, particularly when it comes to matters like language, cuisine and music. In matters concerning religion, most of my cohorts are from India, though not all. In issues involving housing and employment, we need to construct working relationships not only with those from the Indian subcontinent but also other Asians and generally with people from all third world nations. In other matters like recruitment into the U.S. armed services and in some job situations as well, we share a commonality of interest more with the orthodox Jews who wear a yarmulke than with any group from India. In fact, in these matters the representatives of the Indian government and Indian groups are often the least understanding or supportive of the Sikhs.

**To me being a good Sikh and a good American are not mutually exclusive concepts. Moreover, one can love the heritage of India of which we are proud products, and yet not identify all that much with the bureaucracy and the government of India.**

Identity and integration are not mutually exclusive ideas. Integration is possible only when there is a sense of identity. To become an attractive mosaic requires that each element of the mosaic have a clearly defined niche; only then can the whole be greater than the sum of the parts. To live here and strive to remain unchanged is foolish for it only creates a self-imposed ghetto of the mind. To refuse to change means a refusal to grow.

On the other hand, we have brought a rich heritage here; to abandon it is to diminish ourselves and to rob this society as well. By contributing our culture to this mosaic, we pay back for the opportunities it has given us. But that rich heritage of ours does not lie in homage to two-bit politicians or to celluloid gods and goddesses of the Indian film industry. The only desirable integration for a small minority such as ours lies in a mosaic where our identity is sacrosanct.

*Dr.I.J. Singh, in New York*

# The Murky Business of India Day Parades ...



*Bollywood leads the parade*

## ... in New York & New Jersey

Every year the number of India Day Parades being organised in NY & NJ are increasing. Dave Makkar from New Jersey writes : If we take a quick look, the only purpose of these Parades is to make a quick name as well as quick money or monetary favors for the organisers or to dispense monetary favours to the favorite vendors, with least amount of efforts as well as a chance for them to be close to Bollywood celebrities, local officials and politicians. In nutshell none of these organisations have anything to do with rich culture and traditions of India or its 30 states or its religious diversity. All they do is parade themselves, their families, friends,



*No comments!*

vendors, Bollywood stars, local officials and US politicians.

Every year chaos reigns right at the beginning of the parade with hordes of badge and sash wearing office bearers, their sponsors and friends breaking the cordons to be near the Bollywood Star, the so called Grand Marshal for the Parade. All that the parade viewers on the sidelines could see is an unruly mass of organisers, sponsors and their friends behaving like animals rolling down the avenue along with meaningless floats. Noisy and vulgar Bollywood numbers blare from each of the floats with barely clad performers, most of which did not necessarily portray any theme representing India or its culture or its Independence Day.

If we take a close looks at the finances of FIA that claims to be the organiser of largest India Day Parade

outside India, people will be shocked to see how they are misusing and plundering public money. As per IRS form 990 filed by FIA in 2011 their Parade cost them \$357,000 which does not include the free air tickets or hotel accommodation or other favours FIA got from India's national carrier Air India or other Indian public sector organisations.

In contrast, the annual Sikh Day Parade in New York which has practically the same number of floats made by the same vendor, enormous numbers of men, women and children as well as numerous marching Bands, costs only \$85,000. The Sikh Day Parade is well organised with the right message with more than plenty of free food (*langar*), water and snacks for those taking part as well as local New Yorkers.

*Dave Makkar*



*The commercial aspect*

# Bhangra without Borders



## It's Happening, and in the USA !

I first heard the strains of the song *Mundian to Bach Ke* ('Beware of the Boys') in the most unlikely place, a café in Berlin recently. I was intrigued by the popular response it evoked from an audience that obviously did not know a word of Punjabi. A detailed introduction to hip-hop music and its European variants followed and I presumed that the lusty beat of the *bhangra* went well with determined beer drinking.

But the strains of the lyrics and the music remained embedded in my subconscious and then not so long ago, I heard the song again full blast in yet another

unlikely place, Plano, a suburb of Dallas, Texas aka Dubyaland. This time it was from a car full of young American kids and very soon I gathered that this song was part of the hip-hop aficionados' preferred beats. *Bhangra*, it seemed, had arrived in distant Texas and two inferences presented themselves. Either *bhangra* had liberated itself from the confines of the Punjabi diaspora or Plano had been subsumed by the South Asian influx.

But a recent article in the New York Times confirmed that *bhangra* in general and the re-mix of this particular song *Mundian* has indeed made it

to the top slot of the hip-hop circuit in the USA. Global musical preferences are electric and the distinctive music of foreign lands whether it is the samba or the calypso have found their supporters across the globe at different points of time and have been reflected in the popular culture of the period.

Hip-hop is a generic term for a cultural movement that had its origins in the Bronx in New York in the early 1970s. Specialised dancing, graffiti art and an earthy bouncy music were part of the envelope and Kool Herc is acknowledged as the first hip-hop DJ. Innovation with the technology of music and a rejection of existing and accepted norms in software shaped the evolution of hip-hop which differently became a statement of non-conformity and alternative identity when many forms of socio-political and cultural turbulence were animating American society.

The trajectory of *Mundian* is closely linked with Rajinder Rai, its creator aka Panjabi MC who adapted the 1997 hit *Fire It Up* by 'Busta Rhymes' and leavened it with the music of the *bhangra*, the single string tumbi, the booming drum and the voice of Bollywood singer Labh Janjua. Thus was born *Mundian*, which was first introduced into the South Asian diaspora in UK and was making it to the pop charts in Europe. The real synthesis took place in Europe. The real synthesis took place in Europe reiterating the adage that music has become the metaphor of modernity for the younger generation and Jay Z who heard Rai's innovations with *bhangra* felt encouraged to rap and re-mix *Mundian* and now *Beware of the Boys* has become the rage all over the USA.

A single swallow does not herald the summer but *Mundian* has inadvertently become a modest symbol for one strand of the complexity that underpins globalisation and the interface between modernity and tradition that has been enabled by technology. The dialectical co-relation is that the very techno-commercial dynamic that brings the *bhangra* to the



*Bhangra at Princeton, USA*

diaspora empowers the latter's sense of identity with primeval latter's sense of identity with primeval symbols. In this case, rustic music also enables it to be liberated from the ghetto that the South Asian community in UK was being painted into. A more detailed analysis of the evolution of modern Punjabi pop and rap reveals an instructive pattern. From the early 1980s, major names such as Daler Mehndi among others moved from the UK and US back to India through *purabiya* – Bihar and UP—to both sides of the Punjab before the Internet and digital technology revolutionised both the arts and the media leading to a ubiquitous new media arts that is technology-driven and constantly morphing into new forms.

*Mundian's* lyrics are traditional and almost predictable in their interplay of the felicitous and the feral. The winsome, nubile young protagonists are warned to beware of the boys and the mix of the sensuous and erotic in such verses is





*Bhangra boys—and girls—in the USA*

a characteristically Indian trait. It has an inherent hook that hypnotises the listener in the diaspora and thereby helps the sales graph and revenues to zoom up. Yet, the lyrics also reflect very deep subterranean rhythms and those familiar with the evolution of the evocative lyric in Punjabi music will discern the influence of the late Chamkeela, a victim of the militant terrorism that once engulfed the state.

But more than a content analysis of the lyrics which is outside the scope of this comment and author, what is perhaps more relevant is the inference that *Mundian* is an assertion of the increasing autonomy of the cultural component of the Indian experience in the face of globalisation

and the primacy accorded to the western idiom. Classical Indian music and some of the better known practitioners have had a loyal constituency in some parts of the West but what is germane about *Mundian* is the manner in which the folk idiom from distant Punjab whose only culture it used to be equipped is agriculture has mutated and permeated the popular culture of the average kid a suburban America careening on a skate-board, chewing gum with baseball cap jauntily worn in reverse mode while the headphones reverberate to hip-hop.

*Amrika, bach ke rehein!*

*C Uday Bhaskar*