



# Sikh Research Journal

**Vol. 8 No. 1**

This article is from \*Sikh Research Journal\*, the online peer-reviewed journal of Sikh and Punjabi Studies

Sikh Research Journal \*Vol. 8 No. 1 Published: Spring 2023.

ISSN 2771-3520

<http://sikhresearchjournal.org>

<http://sikhfoundation.org>

## ***Anahad Naad* and Pictorial Resonance: The Halo and Sonic Vibration in Sikh Art**

**Gurminder Kaur Bhogal**

Catherine Mills Davis Professor of Music, Wellesley College, MA

### **Abstract**

The halo is a familiar symbol across Buddhist, Christian, and Mughal art, but its role in Sikh visual media has yet to be acknowledged and examined. This article studies the Sikh halo in relation to key philosophical concepts of *dasam dwar* (the tenth door/opening, located at the crown of the head) and *anahad naad* (an embodied perception of an internally heard music). When viewed from a Sikh perspective, the halo emerges as an external marker of an internal attunement to the divine one. As spectators, we attune to the latent sonic frequencies of the halo, which reflect the spiritual attainment of Sikh Gurus and other holy figures. Sikh art allows the inner/outer dialectic of the halo to come into view: to our eyes, the halo signals spiritual realization, while to our ears, it invites us to contemplate the intensity of sonic vibration that resounds through and emits from the divine body in tandem with the expressive *kirtan* of Bhai Mardana and his *rabab* (a plucked chordophone).

Drawing on select artwork, I invite spectators to experience the sonic dimension through attention to the unique positioning of the halo in relation to the *rabab*. My critical focus on sonic vibration as suggested by a symbolic connection between the halo and *anahad naad* allows a concentration at the head to offer a new vantage point for understanding the iconographical presence of this symbol. This article centers Sikh art within the long history of the halo while highlighting how this symbol establishes a unique epistemological system of expressive meaning.

**Keywords:** halo, Sikh art, *ahat naad*, *anahad naad*, *dasam dwar*, Bhai Mardana, *rabab*, Guru Nanak

### **Introduction: A Sikh View of the Halo**

Spectators of Sikh art will, at some point, notice and wonder about a visual marker that is present in many images: the halo. My attention to this motif focuses on its relationship to sound. This sonic dimension is associated with the physical realm of music making where it manifests as *ahat naad* (struck sound). In addition, sound exists in the metaphysical realm as pure vibration and timbre where it assumes an idealized state of *anahad naad* (unstruck sound).<sup>1</sup> I have been drawn to the sonic properties of the halo since my earliest study of the *Janamsakhi* corpus and Sikh portraits, during which time I was captivated by a triangular relationship between Guru Nanak, Bhai Mardana, and his *rabab* (a

<sup>1</sup> I examine *ahat naad* and *anahad naad* in greater detail in my forthcoming book about Sikh *kirtan*.

plucked chordophone), no matter who else or what else happened to participate in the visual narrative (whether animals, flora, fauna, and meteorological phenomena). Despite my conscious focus on stylized depictions of the *rabab*, my senses were also subconsciously attuning to a potent symbol of these illustrations, what Som Prakash Verma observes as “a large radiating halo” in Mughal art, and whose solar luminosity alludes to divinity, a quality that is immediately conferred upon those who are adorned with the halo whether Sikh Gurus and kings, faqirs, swamis, or Mughal Emperors.<sup>2</sup>

This article concerns itself with a curious characteristic of the halo: its universal placement around the heads of notable figures across different visual traditions. Art historians have offered various interpretations of the halo, and some critics have ventured to explain its close placement to the head and the body. Beyond the obvious association of the head with the brain, a site of intelligence and wisdom, art historical analysis of the halo has tended to veer towards interpretation rather than addressing the question of *why*, in particular, the head is the preferred location for this symbol across traditions of representation in Buddhist, Hindu, Mughal, Christian, Sikh, and other stylizations of divine power and spiritual attainment.

Drawing on examples from Sikh art, my article tackles this question from the unique perspective of Sikh sound. I explore how Bhai Mardana’s *kirtan* (devotional music) on the *rabab* transports Guru Nanak to a deep meditative state where a shift of consciousness is indicated by the luminous halo placed around his head. I also discuss the pictorial significance of a distant gaze, often conferred upon Guru Nanak, as indicating a type of listening that is inwardly attuned. My interest in sonic vibration compels me to examine the connection between the halo and *anahad naad*, while viewing their concentration at the head as offering a new vantage point for exploring the iconographical significance of this symbol and its external amplification of an inwardly heard *anahad naad*. In Sikh art especially, the halo emerges as a sacred motif that mediates the realms of the metaphysical and the physical, allowing divine vibration to filter through from one domain into the other.

When the halo is viewed in relation to Sikh imagery and its philosophical traditions, this symbol is drawn into existing discourses on *dasam dwar* (the tenth

---

<sup>2</sup> Som Prakash Verma, “Symbols and Motifs in the Mughal School of Art,” *Art and Culture: Painting and Perspective*, eds. Ahsan Jan Qaisar and Som Prakash Verma, Vol. 2 (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 2002), 51.

door), a concept borrowed from yoga, which refers to the crown of the head. The opening of *dasam dwar* through deep meditation facilitates a synaesthetic inner experience of the divine. In *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (Sikh sacred verse), *anahad naad* resounds through the timbres of such instruments as *bheri*, *kinguri*, *bayn*, *rabab*, *sinyi*, *pakhawaj*, *ghungroo*, and *tura*. When these instruments are intertwined at the peak of the meditative experience, their voluminous intensity is invoked by the concept of *panch shabad* (five sacred sounds/utterances). As informed by theories of aura, corporeal frequency, and scholarship in sound studies and vibration studies, I argue that the symbolic function of the halo makes evident that which cannot be seen but only felt: it projects outwards the intensity of light and sonic expression that are perceived within the mind and body as the consciousness shifts to its highest state at the pinnacle of the spiritual experience of *anahad naad*, also described as the fourth state (*chautha pad*) in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*.<sup>3</sup> A confluence of five sensations—sound, sight, taste, touch, and smell—mark this psychical state as sensorially resplendent and its abundance signals an authentic experience of divinity. Guru Nanak offers a sixteen-stanza metaphoric description of the inner journey towards hearing *anahad naad* in Raag Maru-Dakhni. Verses three to nine address the shift in consciousness during the final stage of spiritual ascent:

*At the tenth gate, the primal one, the unknowable and infinite, dwells; the unseen one reveals their being...The blowing wind is the fly-brush, waving over the divine one. The creator placed the two lamps, the sun and the moon; the sun merges in the house of the moon...The tree of life is fruitful, bearing the fruit of ambrosial nectar/The Gurmukh [a devotee oriented towards the Guru's teachings] intuitively sings the glorious praises of the divine one and eats the food of sublime essence. The dazzling light glitters, although neither the moon nor the stars are shining...unstruck tinkling [jhunkar, the timbre of small bells] vibrates continuously in the home of the fearless one...<sup>4</sup>*

At this moment of ecstasy, the devotee feels, tastes, smells, sees, and hears in a synaesthetic inner acknowledgement of union with the divine.

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Ralph Losey, "The Impact on the Aura of Music, Sound, and PrimaSounds," in *Capturing the Aura: Integrating Science, Technology and Metaphysics*, ed. C. E. Lindgren (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2008), 135–152.

<sup>4</sup> *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, 1033–8 to 1034–8. I have tweaked the translation by Singh Sahib Sant Singh Khalsa as published on <https://www.srigranth.org>.

Against this context, the halo emerges as an external marker of an internal attunement to the divine one, which is experienced through corporeal manifestation of *sukh* (peace), *sehaj* (equipoise), and *anand* (bliss). *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* places great emphasis on the *Gurmukh*—a devotee who is oriented towards the Guru—as existing in this idealized state, where an unceasing corporeal vibration is maintained through a constant, effortless remembrance and inner recitation of the divine name (*naam simran*). A continued exploration of the vibrating body now asks us, as spectators of Sikh art, to attune to the latent sonic frequencies of the halo as it extends the powerful auras and vibrational energy of Sikh Gurus and other holy figures outwards into the physical world, while marking their unwavering existence as spiritually realized beings. Seen through the lens of *dasam dwar/anahad naad*, Sikh art allows the inner/outer dialectic of the halo to come into view in the following way. To our eyes, the halo signals spiritual attainment. But to our ears, the halo invites us to contemplate the intensity of sonic vibration that is set in motion by Bhai Mardana's *kirtan*. His devotional music is absorbed into the body, and it activates the vibrational force of *anahad naad*, which signals the opening of *dasam dwar*. An intense inner corporeal resonance breaks through the body's pores to become outwardly manifest in the vibrational form of the halo.

This cyclic motion shows that the Sikh experience of sound goes beyond a dualistic concept of *ahat* and *anahad*, and it requires heightened listening since corporeal aura is only heard by those who are acutely perceptive of its resonance. As Ernest B. Havell explains, “the aura represents the subtle, luminous envelope, by which...the bodies of all human beings, animals, and even trees, plants, and stones are surrounded, though to those without a developed psychic sense it is invisible.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, it is a depiction of the subtle body, described as *sukshma sarira* in Sanskrit, that is the focus of this article. The visual materials that I examine invite us to experience the sonic dimension through a unique positioning of the halo in relation to the *rabab* and enlightened figures. In particular, the prominence of the *rabab* intensifies an underlying sonic resplendence. Whether its strings are actively being plucked or not, reverberations that issue from the halo and *rabab* float through the image. In the examples studied here, I will ask spectators to listen as openly as possible, both to the implicit resonance of the halo, but also to the imagined *raag* of the *rabab*.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Binfield Havell, *The Ideals of Indian Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1920), 48.

### *Sensing the Halo*

Art historians have offered various interpretations of the halo, and some have ventured to explain its association with the head and the body. For example, Ananda Coomaraswamy draws on a passage from the *Bhagavad Gita* in claiming that the halo indicates spiritual enlightenment, which manifests in the form of corporeal illumination: “where there is gnosis, light springs forth from the orifices of the body.”<sup>6</sup> This understanding echoes that of the twelfth-century Persian philosopher, Suhrawardi, who conceived of the purified soul as being illuminated by divine light.<sup>7</sup> Recently, Murad Khan Mumtaz offers a unique perspective with respect to Mughal art: “Traditionally in Islam, the forehead of a spiritually realized person is believed to be the place where God’s light shines most directly, as that part of the body touches the ground when in prostration.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the nineteenth-century French art historian, Adolphe Napoléon Didron’s 1896 study of the halo, offers some critical insights in relation to Christian iconography: “the nimbus is nothing more than a representation of the radiation of light supposed to issue from the head”; he observes that “the nimbus was first attached to the heads of intelligent and virtuous persons,” a claim that has since been echoed by the Spanish intellectual, Juan Eduardo Cirlot.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> See *Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter 14, 11; and Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, “Some Sources of Buddhist Iconography,” *B. C. Law Volume*, Part I (Poona: India, 1945), 471.

<sup>7</sup> Milad Milani, “The Subtle Body in Sufism,” in *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West: Between Mind and Body*, eds. Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston (New York: Routledge, 2013), 176.

<sup>8</sup> Murad Khan Mumtaz draws on *Risāla-i šāhībiyya* (1642), an autobiographical account by Jahanara Begum (daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan), where she describes a visual encounter with her Sufi spiritual guide (Mulla Shah): “with her own eyes, she pays special attention to the forehead, from which she sees rays of divine light shooting out.” See “Contemplating the Face of the Master: Portraits of Sufi Saints as Aids to Meditation in Seventeenth-Century Mughal India,” *Ars Orientalis*, Volume 50 [no year, no page nos].

<sup>9</sup> Adolphe Napoléon Didron, *Christian Iconography; or The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages*, trans. E. J. Millington and Margaret Stokes, Volume 1 (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896), 33 and 152. Didron is among the few to address this topic in relation to Christian iconography. He observes the emergence of three principal sources of rays from: “the three essential parts of the cranium, the region of the brain or cerebrum, and the two temples, where life, defined and concentrated, throbs in the great arteries.” He further explains that “rays are seen to issue in much greater abundance from the head than from the trunk because the head is the most important part of man...the forehead and the temples...are, in fact, the essential organs,” (40). Also see J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (London: Routledge, 1962/1971), 135–136.

These explanations must be read against a long tradition of scholarship on the history and allegorical significance of the halo in art from ancient Egypt, Persia, India, Tibet, China, and Japan. Some researchers have attempted to distinguish between different visual representations of the halo itself (the simple halo, the disc halo), as well as its appearance in the form of a cloud (nimbus) and engulfing shape (aureole and almond-shaped mandorla) when divine aura encircles the entire body as seen in the form of *prabhavalaya* (background arch) in Hindu sculpture (Prasanna Khamitkar and Kalyan K. Chakravarty) and in Gandharan Buddhist sculpture (Percy Brown). Others have studied its appearance in aboriginal cave art (Serkan Sunay) and in the form of engravings on ancient Kushan coins where the halo stands in for the “luminous deities of the sun and the moon” (Benjamin Rowland Jr); and in ancient Indian art where the halo was first manifest in the form of a large disc, called *śiraśchakra* and *prabhāmandala*, against which a deity’s head would be placed (Rao).<sup>10</sup>

Verma observes references to the halo in the sixth-century treatise by Nagnajit, *Chitralaksana*, where the depiction of a king’s head is described as being “surrounded by a blaze of light,” synonymous with divinity.<sup>11</sup> Scholarly analyses have tended to focus on the symbolism of the halo given its allusions to the sun, its signification of a spiritual or divine status, and its imperial dimension in view of its designation of monarchy as an emblem of the divine.<sup>12</sup> Rao’s explanation

---

<sup>10</sup> See T. A. Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Part 1 (Madras: Law Printing House, 1914), 32. Didron is among the few scholars to differentiate between the nimbus (“encircling the head”), aureole (encircling “that of the body”), and glory (“the union of both) in *Christian Iconography*, 22–38 (25). For a brief history of the halo see E. H. Ramsden, “The Halo: A Further Enquiry into its Origin,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* (April 1941), 78/457, 124; and Benjamin Rowland Jr., “The Iconography of the Flame Halo,” *Bulletin of the Fogg Art Museum* 11/1 (January 1949), 13.

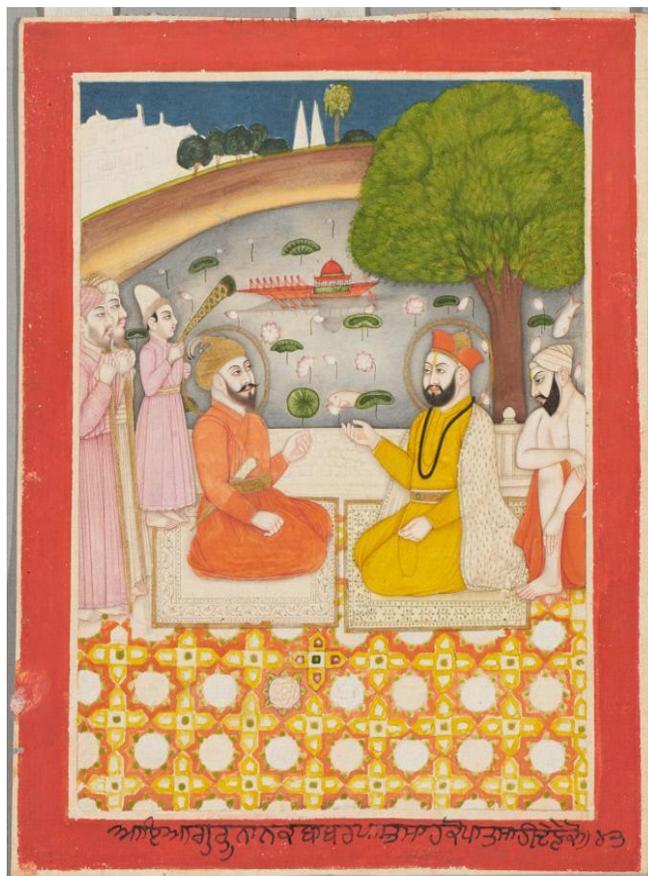
Additional sources that provide an opportunity for further reading on the halo include *Exploring India’s Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), 181–203; Serkan Sunay, “Some Opinions About Origin of Nimbus,” *Ekev Academi Dergisi* 13/38 (2009), 225–233; Prasanna E. Khamitkar, “Study on the Prabhavalaya: Aureole of Gods and Goddesses,” *Chitrolekha International Magazine on Art and Design* 6/2 (2016): 35–52; Kalyan Kumar Chakravarty, “Garh Dhanaura,” in *Grove Art Online*; and Percy Brown, *Indian Painting Under the Mughals: A.D. 1550 to A.D. 1750* (New Delhi: Cosmo, 1913), 172–173.

<sup>11</sup> Verma, “Symbols and Motifs in the Mughal School of Art,” 48.

<sup>12</sup> Coomaraswamy explains how “the disk of gold placed behind the fire altar to represent the Sun may well be the origin of the later *prabhā-mandala* or *śiraś-chakra* (nimbus).” See *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (London: Goldston, 1927), 41. On this topic, also see Sukumari Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony: A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology from the Vedas to the Puranas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 211–235.

that the *prabhāmandala* “is intended to serve as a material representation of the glory or circle of light shining around the head of gods,” signals a mutual and universal understanding of the halo as exuding the spiritual and divine aura of the person or deity to which it is attached.<sup>13</sup>

For example, the association of the halo with divine supremacy, monarchical sovereignty, and regal power as an emblem of divinity, can be seen in the eighteenth-century painting, “Guru Nanak Talks with the Mughal Emperor Babur,” where both Guru Nanak and Emperor Babur are decorated with identical halos (see **Figure 1**).<sup>14</sup> Although it was “personal holiness and moral virtue” that was signified through its association with holy men, Didron distinguishes the halo’s function in Ottoman art as signifying monarchical power, which explains long held interpretations of the halo as alluding to a crown while pointing to



**Figure 1.** *Guru Nanak Talks with the Mughal Emperor Babur* from a manuscript of the *Janam Sakhi* (Life Stories) (ca. 1755-1770). Object Number: 1998.58.38, 20.3 cm x 17.1 cm, Asian Art Museum

<sup>13</sup> Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> See “Guru Nanak Talks with the Mughal Emperor Babur,” (1755–1770) (Object Number 1998.58.38):

<http://asianart.emuseum.com/view/objects/asitem/subject@Janam%20Sakhi/35?t:state:flow=3ea1576a-fc2c-4b3d-ae39-18ac420bc238>. There are many other paintings that document the encounter between Guru Nanak and Babur. A mid-eighteenth-century painting is shown in Daljeet [Kaur], *The Sikh Heritage: A Search for Totality* (New Delhi: Prakash Book Depot, 2004), 134.

terrestrial control and power as having divine origins. As we see in **Figure 1**, this lineage is abundant in Mughal portraiture where Emperors are often conceived of as delegates for divinity. This particular encounter is said to have taken place in Saidpur (now Eminabad, Pakistan) and Pashaura Singh's analysis of verses from *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, including Guru Nanak's *Baburvani*, provides compelling reasoning both for the actual occurrence of this meeting, as well as why it may have escaped documentation in the Emperor's memoirs, *Baburnama*.<sup>15</sup>

Not wanting to diminish the social or divine status of either figure, the painter of this encounter is careful to dress both figures with their appropriate social signifiers: a cap-like head covering for Guru Nanak, a Mughal-styled turban decorated with plumage (*kalghi*) for Babur; a ceremonial black thread around the neck (*seli*) and *mala* (rosary) in the left hand for Guru Nanak (Gurdeep Kour reminds us that the *seli* is characteristic of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century portraits of the Sikh Gurus) and a short, sharp dagger tucked into his cummerbund for Babur, emblematic of his rank (again, Kour makes the important point that high ranking Mughals were permitted to carry arms but non-Mughals were not, a rule that was later challenged by Guru Hargobind and Guru Gobind Singh).<sup>16</sup> This painting also retains a symmetry of gesture and placement as the gaze of terrestrial ruler meets that of spiritual ruler while engaged in conversation as indicated by the position of mirroring raised hands in *vitarka mudra*.<sup>17</sup> Seated on rectangular rugs (*maslat*) in *vajrasana* (kneeling position), Guru Nanak and Babur face one another. This is a meeting of equals. Looking carefully, however, the painter seems to elevate Guru Nanak's simplicity above Babur's courtly effects and affects: attended by a single devotee, it is a lone tree that provides shade and alludes to a royal canopy for the Guru, whereas Babur is attended by three richly dressed courtiers, two framing Babur while clasping ornate swords in their scabbards, and one waving a peacock flywhisk (*morchala*).

The radiating “jvālās or protruding tongues of flame” that emanate from their halos and which align their internal radiance and energy with that of the sun, are

---

<sup>15</sup> Pashaura Singh, “Speaking Truth to Power: Exploring Guru Nanak’s *Bābar-vānī* in Light of the *Baburnama*,” *MDPI Religions* 11 (2020), 2.

<sup>16</sup> See Gurdeep Kour, “An Analytical Narration of Sikh Influence in Miniature Paintings of Kangra–Guler Style from 18th-19th Century in Punjab,” Ph.D. Diss., Lovely Professional University, Punjab, 2019, 71; and Gurdeep Kour, *Sikh Miniature Paintings: Patronage, Extension, Stylistic Borrowings and Influences* (Ludhiana: Lahore Books, 2022), 234.

<sup>17</sup> Kour discusses the significance of this *mudra* in this context in “An Analytical Narration of Sikh Influence in Miniature Paintings of Kangra-Guler Style from 18th-19th Century in Punjab,” 234–236.

longstanding across a variety of Indian art as observed by Rao; Khamitkar also observes *javālā* in ancient Hindu sculpture.<sup>18</sup> In keeping with Claudine Bautze-Picron's observation of the flame technique in ancient Buddhist sculpture, we see how *javālā* intensify the symbolism afforded by the halo since they allow divine light to emanate into the surrounding space in the manner of solar energy. Bautze-Picron's focus on the edge of the halo draws attention to the boundary that is maintained by this symbol between the divine and the human, that is, "the limit...between the deity and the outer world," which seems to be bridged when rays emanate from the halo into the realm of the earthly.<sup>19</sup> As divine light pours out of the deity through these *javālā*, it serves to sanctify surrounding spaces and their contents hence the emphasis on *darshan*, a physical immediacy that enables an exchange of glances between deity and devotee across many South Asian religious practices, and a valuable opportunity to give and receive blessings.<sup>20</sup> In **Figure 1**, the visual dynamics of *darshan* where the devotee experiences bliss through ocular perception of the divine gaze are not at play since Babur and Guru Nanak face each other as equals. Unlike art that is oriented towards *darshan*, the spectator/devotee is not given an opportunity to participate in this exchange of glances.

In contrast, the act of *darshan* is foregrounded in another eighteenth-century portrait of Guru Nanak in the Deccani (Hyderabad) style, which likely served a ritualistic function as noted by Daljeet Kaur (see **Figure 2**).<sup>21</sup> Certainly, the forward placement of Guru Nanak—in comparison to the background miniaturized figure of Bhai Mardana in the far-left corner—suggests "deity form," as noted by Daljeet Kaur, and allows the spectator to participate in an exchange of glances. I would add that the *javālā* also perform this important role given their organization into a recurring, pyramid pattern, which emanates from the gold rim of an oversized solid green halo. This symbol's bold color and affiliation with gold rays has the practical function of creating a vivid contrast

---

<sup>18</sup> See Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, 32; and Khamitkar, "Study on the Prabhavalaya," 49.

<sup>19</sup> Claudine Bautze-Picron, "The 'Stele' in Bihar and Bengal, 8th to 12th Centuries: Symmetry and Composition," in *Indian Art and Archaeology*, ed. Ellen M. Raven and Karel R. Van Kooij (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 11.

<sup>20</sup> For further scholarship on the topic of *darshan* see Christopher Pinney, 'Photos of the Gods': *The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion, 2004); and Diane L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> This portrait is reproduced in Daljeet [Kaur], *The Sikh Heritage: A Search for Totality*, 135–137.

against the different shades and embroidered patterns of Guru Nanak's conical shaped turban (*dumala*), while allowing the visage to stand out.<sup>22</sup>



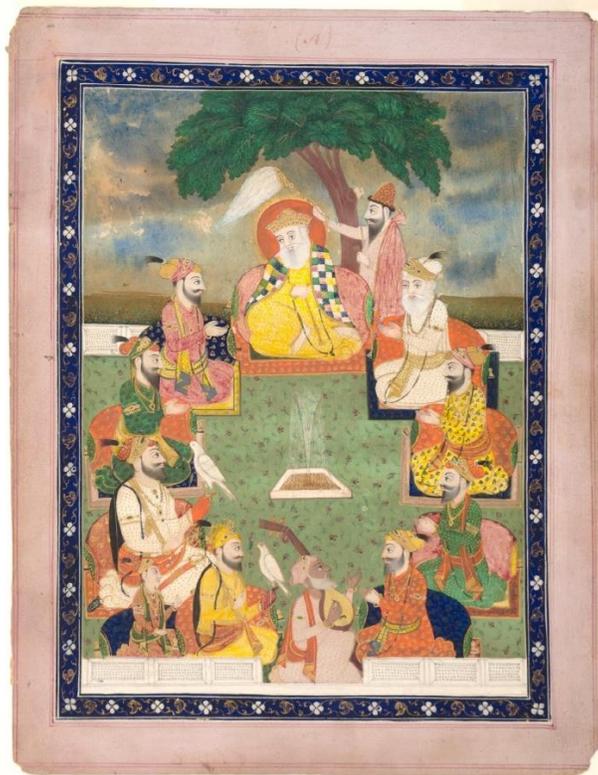
**Figure 2.** *Guru Nanak* (1730-40), 35.5 cm x 4.5 cm, National Museum, New Delhi

The striking juxtaposition of color also prevents facial features from blending with, and therefore getting lost in, the background, as can sometimes happen.<sup>23</sup> Importantly, this technique creates a symbolic allusion to the halos of Mughal portraits where striking color contrast, as well as nuances in the depiction of the halo itself, drew attention to the facial features of the ruler. This technique is captured most spectacularly by Chitarman's rainbow hued expanding halo in

<sup>22</sup> Kour offers a detailed discussion of the turban in Sikh art in *Sikh Miniature Paintings*, 217–232.

<sup>23</sup> I recall portraits of Guru Har Rai (attributed to the Seu-Nainsukh workshop of Guler, early nineteenth century) and Guru Tegh Bahadur (approximately dated at 1670) where the halo is almost an afterthought as reflected in the artists' decisions to encircle the head without changing the color of the background. For Guru Har Rai see: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guru\\_Har\\_Rai.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guru_Har_Rai.jpg) (Acc. no. F-45, Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh); for Guru Tegh Bahadur see <http://asianart.emuseum.com/view/objects/asitem/origin@Northern%20India/34;jsessionid=6558AD36656CCA7DD6CF06B9296A148D?t.state:flow=af836f73-e163-4655-9a3c-14f0e19a2df2> (Object Number: 1998.94).

“Shah Jahan on a Terrace, Holding a Pendant Set with His Portrait,” 1627–28.<sup>24</sup> A particularly striking example from Sikh art can be seen in a mid-nineteenth century watercolor painting, “The Nine Sikh Gurus Seated in a Circle Under a Tree,” (1840).<sup>25</sup> Here, Guru Nanak’s distant gaze is set against a bright red halo, complete with *javālā*, and set against the sky in a gesture that equates the Guru’s radiating energy with that of the sun. Sitting diametrically opposite Guru Nanak, Bhai Mardana plays his *rabab* from afar, his *kirtan* having transported Guru Nanak to a realm of inner contemplation, *anahad naad* (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** *The Nine Sikh Gurus Seated in a Circle Under a Tree* (ca. 1840). Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 28.8 cm x 23.6 cm. Accession Number: 1990.1347, Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, San Diego Museum of Art

<sup>24</sup> For a few examples of the halo in Mughal art see “Shah Jahan on a Terrace, Holding a Pendant Set With His Portrait,” Folio from the *Shah Jahan Album*, 1530–50:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/451270>; *The Rulers of the Mughal Dynasty from Babur to Awrangzeb, with their Ancestor Timur* (1707–12):

<https://www.khalilicollections.org/collections/islamic-art/khalili-collection-islamic-art-the-rulers-of-the-mughal-dynasty-from-babur-to-awrangzeb-with-their-ancestor-timur-mss874/>

<sup>25</sup> [https://collection.sdmart.org/objects-](https://collection.sdmart.org/objects-1/info?query=mfs%20any%20%22Sikh%22&sort=9&page=8&objectName=The%20nine%20Sikh%20gurus%20seated%20in%20a%20circle%20under%20a%20tree)

[1/info?query=mfs%20any%20%22Sikh%22&sort=9&page=8&objectName=The%20nine%20Sikh%20gurus%20seated%20in%20a%20circle%20under%20a%20tree](https://collection.sdmart.org/objects-1/info?query=mfs%20any%20%22Sikh%22&sort=9&page=8&objectName=The%20nine%20Sikh%20gurus%20seated%20in%20a%20circle%20under%20a%20tree). Accession Number:

1990.1347

### Hearing *Kirtan* in Painting

Despite its prominence in Mughal art of the sixteenth century, the halo began to emerge in Sikh art of the eighteenth century, becoming even more prevalent during the nineteenth century when it was associated with portraits of the Sikh Gurus and royalty such as Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Maharaja Karam Singh of Patiala. Regarding Sikh portraiture, Gurdeep Kour observes that Pahari painters based in Guler and Kangra “borrowed the idiom of [the] nimbus from the circulating portraits of Sikh Gurus commissioned in [the] Punjab plains.”<sup>26</sup> With respect to the *Janamsakhi* corpus some painters, such as Alam Chand Raj, didn’t use the halo at all, preferring to indicate “the spiritual sovereignty of Guru Nanak” through other techniques such as half-closed eyes, sizing, and perspective. As Atsushi Ikeda notes, in addition to his larger size and higher placement within the image, “Guru Nanak’s portrayal is divinized by painting his face three fourth.”<sup>27</sup> Even as the halo also seems to be missing from the Seu-Nainsukh (Pahari) workshop’s production of *Janamsakhi* illustrations, it is present in the Unbound Set (Asian Art Museum, which is dated to the last quarter of eighteenth century and early nineteenth century) where it immediately draws the spectator’s attention towards the figure adorned by the halo, thereby affording an opportunity to engage in *darshan*, an exchange of glances between Guru Nanak and the spectator/devotee, also observed by Ikeda.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Kour, “An Analytical Narration of Sikh Influence in Miniature Paintings of Kangra-Guler Style From 18th-19th Century in Punjab,” 236. Also see Kour’s discussion about “Capturing Aura” in *Sikh Miniature Paintings*, 203–204.

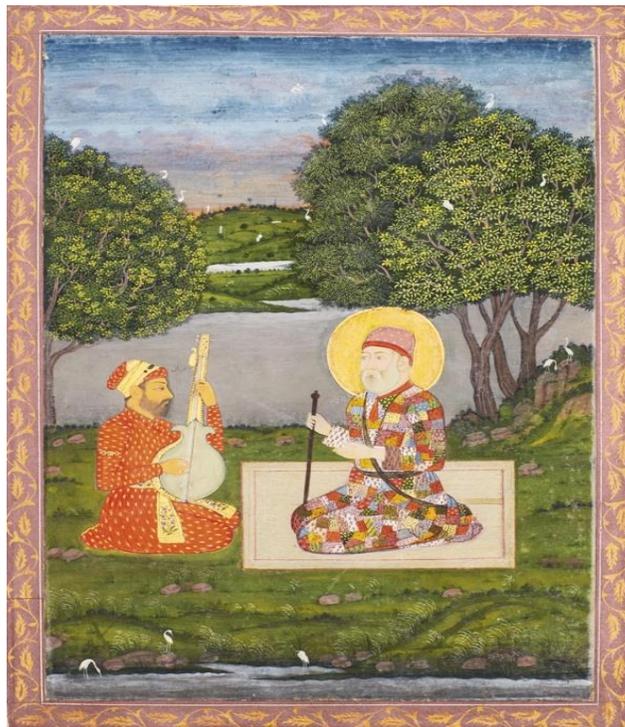
<sup>27</sup> Atsushi Ikeda, “Early Sikh Imagery in Janam-Sakhi Painting: A comparison of the B-40, the Guler and the Unbound Set,” *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 16/3 (2020), 254. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh offers an in-depth study of Alam Chand Raj’s illustrations in “Corporeal Metaphysics: Guru Nanak in Early Sikh Art,” *History of Religions* 53/1 (August 2013): 28–65.

<sup>28</sup> Ikeda, “Early Sikh Imagery in Janam-Sakhi Painting,” 267.

There are many instances where allusions to sound in the form of vibrations that issue from the *rabab* seem to reverberate through the visual frame and are amplified through the halo when it is present. In the eighteenth-century painting, “Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana in a Landscape” (1750–1799), we see the idiosyncratic Mughal style of halo presented as a solid, gold, flat disc in keeping with portrayals of Emperors and “rare pictures of holy men,” as Verma explains (see **Figure 4**).<sup>29</sup> The

divine aura of Guru Nanak is conveyed through the golden halo’s allusion to a dazzling solar energy whose potent vibration is conveyed through the image especially given that the *rabab* is in view—or, maybe, *because* the *rabab* is in view.

Here, we should note the placement of the halo. While beckoning to Bhai Mardana in *vitarka mudra*, Guru Nanak kneels in *vajrasana*, thereby allowing the halo to be positioned lower in the frame and not in the same plane as the sun. The connection between *kirtan* and divinity is brought clearly into view. The halo’s indication of individual spiritual attainment—in contrast to Guru Nanak, Bhai Mardana does not wear a halo—points to an elevated consciousness whose transformed state is captured sonically as the *raag* of Bhai Mardana’s *rabab* finds

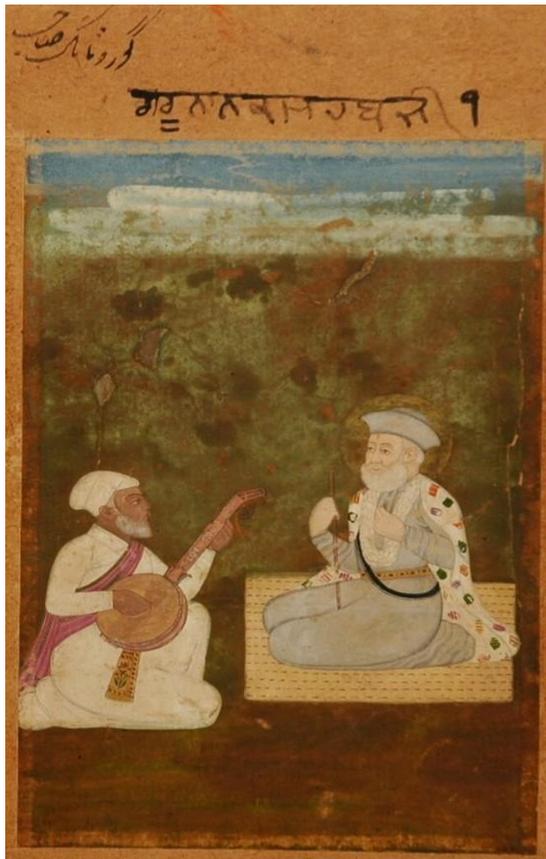


**Figure 4.** *Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana in a Landscape* (1750-1799). Gouche on paper, 24 cm x16.2 cm

<sup>29</sup> See <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2016/arts-islamic-world-116220/lot.62.html>. Verma, “Symbols and Motifs in the Mughal School of Art,” 48. Verma also notes the Mughal preference for a European-styled halo “for the visual representation of their patron’s expression and the symbolic form of the divine light.” On this topic, also see Jason Farago, “What a Tiny Masterpiece Reveals About Power and Beauty,” *New York Times* April 2, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/04/02/arts/design/shah-jahan-chitarman.html>

a parallel resonance in the form of divine, *anahad naad*, which echoes through the golden hues of the halo across the painting. It is not only an externally made music that is being shown, but also a heightened experience of an internally heard music that is captured, above all, in Guru Nanak's glance which falls not on the source of external sound, Bhai Mardana's *rabab*, but reaches far into the distance, hearing the sound of divinity as it reverberates through the universe. We see this far-off glance in the eighteenth-century Deccani painting explored above (**Figure 2**) where Bhai Mardana's distant *kirtan* seems to have carried Guru Nanak into a contemplative state as indicated by *dhyana mudra*, the gesture of his right hand; as well as in another eighteenth-century painting (in the collection of S. S. Hitkari).<sup>30</sup> This particular painting, "Baba Nanak Listening to Mardana's Rabbab," features a downward distant gaze.<sup>31</sup>

At moments like these, we witness the transformation of *raag* into *naad*. While Bhai Mardana actively plays his *rabab* at Guru Nanak's bidding, an externally made *kirtan* seems to facilitate and intensify an internally experienced *anahad naad*. As the *rabab* and halo occupy the same frame, we also see how a larger cultural understanding of *kirtan* as a catalyst for an experience of divinity was in place and understood as a defining trait of Sikh spiritual practices as shown in eighteenth-century painting. Indeed, depictions of Guru Nanak



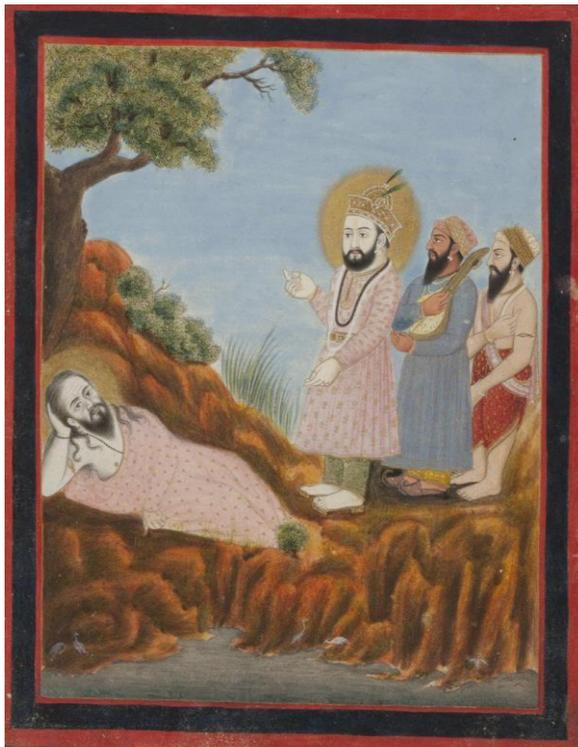
**Figure 5.** *Guru Nanak, erster Sikh-Guru, mit Musiker* (Folio aus einer Serie über die Begründer der Sikh-Religion—Folio from a Series about the Founders of the Sikh Religion) (1830), 17 cm x 11 cm, Inv.-Nr. RVI 1394

<sup>30</sup> Kour also analyses *mudra* in *Sikh Miniature Paintings*, 202–203.

<sup>31</sup> "Baba Nanak Listening to Mardana's Rabbab" is reproduced in Daljeet [Kaur], *The Sikh Heritage: A Search for Totality*, 118.

and Bhai Mardana, whether produced in the plains or in the hills, often establish a link between *kirtan*, the experience of *anahad naad* as conveyed through a distant gaze, and a vibrating, reverberant halo, as we also see in this miniature portrait from the hills held at the Rietberg Museum in Zurich (1830), and another from the hills produced in the late nineteenth century and held in a private collection in Chandigarh, Punjab (see **Figure 5**).<sup>32</sup>

In other images, too, divine sound reverberates throughout the scene as carried by the imagined voice of Guru Nanak, whether engaged in song or in discourse with the various figures that populate the *Janamsakhi*. An early nineteenth-century watercolor, “Guru Nanak’s Discourse with Datatre on Mount Byar,” is especially instructive on the topic of the halo (see **Figure 6**). Here, the golden halo’s placement against the blue sky aligns Guru Nanak’s vibrational energy with that

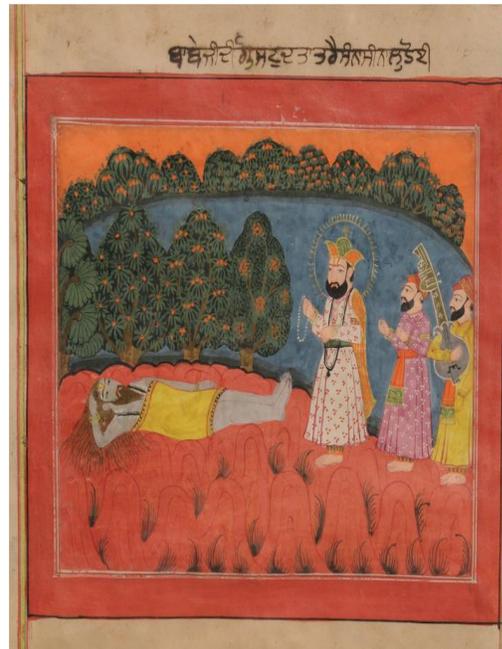


**Figure 6.** *Guru Nanak’s Discourse with Datatre on Mount Byar*, page from a manuscript of the *Janam Sakhi* (Life Stories) (1800-1850). Opaque watercolors and gold on paper, 20.9 cm x 17.8 cm, Object Number: 1998.58.25, Asian Art Museum

<sup>32</sup> See “Guru Nanak, erster Sikh-Guru, mit Musiker,” held at the Museum Rietberg (Zurich, Switzerland): <https://emp-web-101.zetcom.ch:443/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=66875&viewType=detailView>. This image is also reproduced in Kour, *Sikh Miniature Paintings*, 26. Also see “Guru Nanak, with Bhai Mardana Singing,” which is reproduced in B. N. Goswamy, *Piety and Splendour: Sikh Heritage in Art* (New Delhi: National Museum, 2000), 34.

of the sun, a technique that also pervades Mughal portraiture. At the same time, this painting is unusual in that it allows two halos to occupy distinct planes. In addition to Guru Nanak, who is standing up, the esteemed figure of Dattatreya is adorned by a halo. Because he remains lying down, this second halo is placed lower in the frame, rather awkwardly. The painter seems intent on indicating Dattatreya's divine status through this symbol despite its unusual placement.<sup>33</sup>

Bhai Mardana, meanwhile, cups his *rabab* in his left arm and strums it in a droning manner like a *tambura* while Guru Nanak engages with Dattatreya through song, recitation, or speech—it's hard to tell. This image, in particular, draws attention to the association of halo with *anahad naad* given the sympathetically vibrating golden hues of the two halos and their association with Guru Nanak and Dattatreya, while Bhai Mardana and Bhai Bala look on, unadorned by this motif. In contrast, an earlier Kashmiri depiction of the same scene, "Guru Nanak Comes Upon the Sanyasi Dattatreya," (1775/1800) dispenses entirely with Dattatreya's halo while using the convention of *javālā* around an open (unfilled) halo to highlight Guru Nanak's spiritual attainment (see **Figure 7**).<sup>34</sup> These types of depictions, particularly when they are equipped with *javālā*, disperse the imagined melodies of the *rabab* and Guru Nanak's voice through the scene as we also see in a painting housed at the

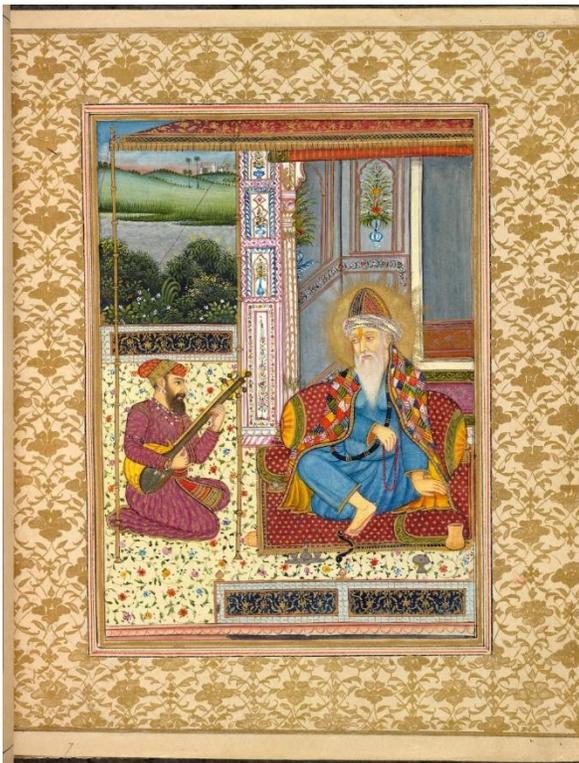


**Figure 7.** *Guru Nanak Comes Upon the Sanyasi Dattatreya* (1775/1800), Kashmir, 25.5 cm x 31.3 cm

<sup>33</sup> "Guru Nanak's Discourse with Dattatreya on Mount Byar," (Object Number 1998.58.25): [asianart.emuseum.com/view/objects/asitem/subject@Guru%20Nanak/24?t:state=flow=bd43c69a-983d-43e3-9585-02def7718883](http://asianart.emuseum.com/view/objects/asitem/subject@Guru%20Nanak/24?t:state=flow=bd43c69a-983d-43e3-9585-02def7718883)

<sup>34</sup> See <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/guru-nanak-comes-upon-the-sanyasi-dattatreya-unknown-kashmir-school/tAEUmgJHjfsCxA?hl=en> Additional paintings at the Asian Art Museum that show two halos include "Guru Nanak's Meeting with Praladh," (Object Number 1998.58.26) and "Guru Nanak Meets Nath Siddhas at the Village of Achal Batala" (Object Number 1998.58.31). Both paintings show a "droning" *rabab*, so to speak. See also "Guru Nanak's Meeting with Dhru Bhagat on Mount Kailasha," (Object Number 1998.58.27). Collectively, these paintings incorporate halos with flames (*javālā*).

Government Museum and Art Gallery in Chandigarh (reproduced in Kour), as well as some nineteenth-century paintings including a miniature, “Sikh Gurus” (1820), and “Guru Nanak in Discussion with Gorakh Nath and Other Yogis,” (a late nineteenth-century painting from the Punjab plains).<sup>35</sup> These last two mentioned paintings are particularly striking for the way they contrast the colors of a filled-in, solid green disc, reminiscent of the royal Mughal halo, with its darkened rim and lustrous gold *javālā*.



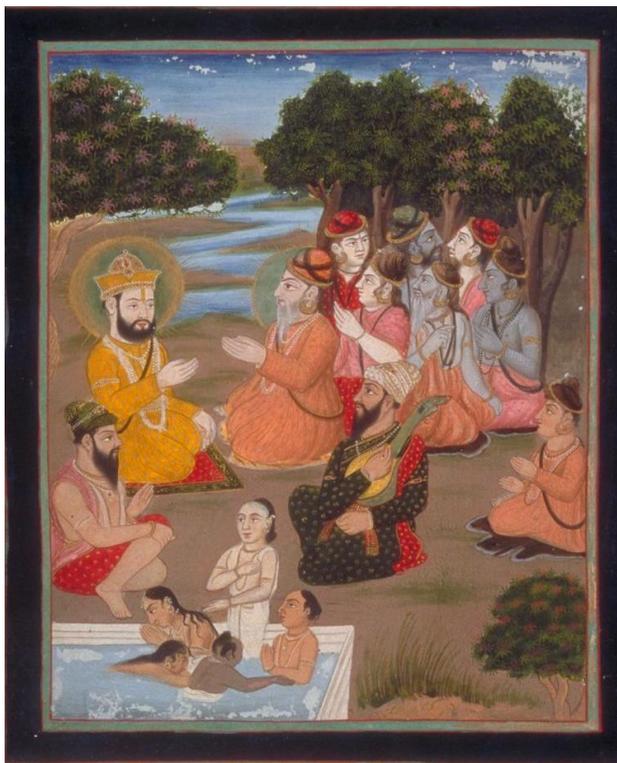
**Figure 8.** Durgashankara Pathaka, *Sarvasiddhantattvacudamani* or “Crest-jewel of the Essence of all Systems of Astronomy” (Nineteenth Century), British Library

A more elaborate “flame” effect connected to the technique of *javālā* can be seen in a nineteenth-century painting by the Benarasi astronomer, Durgashankar Pathak, *Sarvasiddhāntattvacūḍāmaṇi* (“Crest-jewel of the Essence of all Systems of Astronomy,” (see **Figure 8**).<sup>36</sup> Here, rays that emanate from the golden halo convey solar power whose radiating energy portrays Guru Nanak as divine while he contemplates Mardana’s playing of the *rabab*. In keeping with Havell’s perception of *javālā* as indicating corporeal aura, one might view the numerous fine rays of this particular halo as also pointing to the intensity of his spiritual energy as it emanates beyond Guru Nanak’s

<sup>35</sup> The painting housed at the Government Museum Chandigarh can be viewed in Kour, *Sikh Miniature Paintings*, 27. Also see <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5483300> (“Sikh Gurus”) and <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5780374> (“Guru Nanak in Discussion with Gorakh Nath and Other Yogis”).

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/sarvasiddhantattvacudamani>

physical being into the surrounding space, sanctifying the area as it does so.<sup>37</sup> Again, the connection between *kirtan* and *anahad naad* remains firm: Guru Nanak gazes at Bhai Mardana with half-closed eyes as he inhabits the state of blissful equipoise described in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* as *sukh* (peace), *sehaj* (equipoise), and *anand* (bliss). As the melodies of Bhai Mardana's *rabab* resonate alongside, and feed into the vibrations of the halo, we are also invited to enjoy the beauty of the instrument itself. The painter is careful to showcase the ornate carvings on the underside of the *rabab*'s sound chamber, as well as the elegant barb and stand.



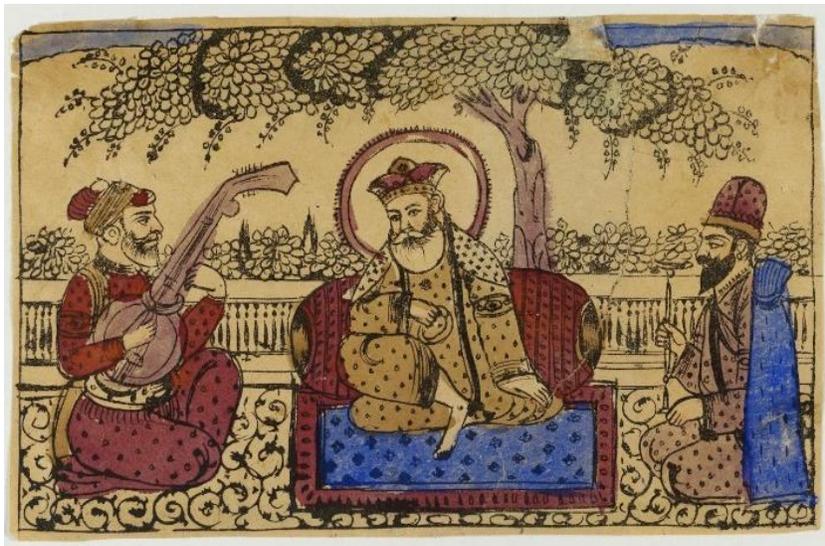
**Figure 9.** *Guru Nanak Meets Nath Siddhas at the Village of Achal Batala, from a manuscript of the Janam Sakhi (Life Stories) (1800–1850). Opaque watercolors on paper, 20.9 cm x 17.8 cm, Object Number: 1998.58.31*

Whereas this scene is relatively peaceful and intimate, a similar treatment of the halo and *javālā* characterizes an animated scene, “Guru Nanak Meets Nath Siddhas at the Village of Achal Batala,” (1800–1850) (see **Figure 9**). Amidst a hubbub of activity and conversation, Bhai Mardana's eyes are locked onto the half-closed eyes of Guru Nanak as they look past the Siddhas and into the distance. The gentle drone that Bhai Mardana provides on his *rabab* accompanies Guru Nanak's discourse. A Mughal-inspired lustrous, sea green halo, circumscribed by a golden

<sup>37</sup> Havell, *The Ideals of Indian Art*, 48–49.

rim of *javālā* that capture Guru Nanak's radiating vibrational energy, is contrasted against the partial, half halo of his yogi counterpart.<sup>38</sup> In a similar treatment of the halo, "Guru Nanak in Discussion with Gorakh Nath and Other Yogis," discussed above, *kirtan* seems to nourish the intensity of divine aura as suggested by Guru Nanak's intent gaze at Bhai Mardana. He actively sings and strums his *rabab* in a drone-like manner while the assembled yogis listen intently.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, in closing, it is worth mentioning that beyond the painterly iconography of the *Janamsakhi*, the halo can be seen in a number of other nineteenth-century media including woodcut and embroidery where a prototypical image takes hold of the imagination. We see a marked distance from the resplendent Mughal styled halo in a colored woodcut of 1875 featuring Guru Nanak with Bhai Mardana and Bhai Bala. Here, the simplicity of the halo, adorned with small *javālā*, is offset by the abundant canopy, which contributes to the structural effect of a *prabhavalaya* as amplified through Bhai Mardana's *kirtan* (see **Figure 10**).<sup>40</sup>



**Figure 10.** *Guru Nanak with Mardana and Bala* (1875). Colored woodcut on paper, Victoria and Albert Museum, Accession Number IM.2:125-1917

<sup>38</sup> <http://searchcollection.asianart.org/view/objects/asitem/Objects@13600/15/titleSort-asc?t.state:flow=4c1b15e9-84e4-4813-a84b-c7155736a500> (Object number: 1998.58.31).

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5780374>

<sup>40</sup> <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70860/woodcut-unknown/> (Accession Number IM.2:125-1917).

The concept of *prabhavalaya* and *javālā* as sources of radiating energy are also behind nineteenth-century embroidered presentations on silk (see **Figure 11**).<sup>41</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, the kinds of scenes depicted through the media of woodcut and embroidery speak to the use of these images as a standard template for portrayals of Guru Nanak and his companions. The halo, as we can see, is now part and parcel of these representations, and continues to find an enduring presence during the twentieth century and into the present day.



**Figure 11.** An Embroidered Silk Panel Depicting Guru Nanak with Bhai Bala and Bhai Mardana (Nineteenth Century), 101 cm x 102 cm

---

<sup>41</sup> See <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/26589/lot/116/>

### Other Interpretations of the Halo in Sikh Art

A wide range of visual examples show that the halo—whether it is depicted in its simplest form as a circle stretching from the base of the shoulders to encircle the entire head, or in its most elaborate form as a strikingly colored solid disc that is articulated by a dark border and radiating flames—is ultimately a symbol that has a long history across different visual traditions around the world. The halo is universally understood as extending an internally vibrant, pure energy into the exterior realm. The significance of this vibration is ultimately determined by the wearer of the halo as to whether it manifests as a sign of being touched by divinity, an emblem of monarchical power, or both, in cases where a sovereign is perceived as being divinely ordained. In these instances, the halo is nothing other than the highest form of flattery for the patron.<sup>42</sup>

With Guru Nanak, the halo has multiple functions. It speaks to his spiritual attainment while allowing the resonances of his voice and of Bhai Mardana's *rabab* to infuse the scenes with an endearing, devotional *kirtan*. This is one reason why the *Janamsakhi* corpus is constantly being renewed in the Sikh cultural imagination since devotees are forever attuned to, and yearn for, the first *kirtan* that the Guru and Bhai Mardana created in harmony with one another as *raag* was intertwined with poetry. A resonating music casts into the physical realm that which is metaphysical: in this instance, the richly resplendent *anahad naad*, which is reverberating through Guru Nanak's interior with the opening of *dasam dwar*, facilitates the experience of spiritual peace/bliss (*anand*). We have also seen that a significant accompanying physical marker of *anahad naad* is the distant gaze, as Guru Nanak looks beyond the source of earthly music, *ahat naad*, created on Bhai Mardana's *rabab*, to acknowledge the source of a cosmic music, *anahad naad*, which permeates the world, audible only to those whose consciousness has attained the highest perfection. It is because these scenes are saturated with divine music in its manifestation as *ahat naad* and *anahad naad* that the halo in Sikh art stands slightly apart from its precursors in Mughal art. Even though the colors, textures, sizes, and luminosity of the halo may be similar between the examples that I have shown here and those familiar from Mughal art, I would argue that the halo in Sikh art has a different vibrational aura because it is inflected through *kirtan* and the divine word.

---

<sup>42</sup> Also see Kour, *Sikh Miniature Paintings*, 203.

Of course, it is only fair to wonder what spectators might make of those images where Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana are engaged in devotional singing, but a halo is nowhere to be found, such as in the B-40 *Janamsakhi*, and in many other portraits. Suffice it to say that by the seventeenth century, this technique, and its strong association with formal painting practices of the Mughal courts, had not been fully absorbed into the workshops of the plains and the hills. Their traditions and approaches to painting and narrative were considerably distinct from one another as Kour has made amply clear. Are music and sound absent from these scenes? I would argue the absence of the halo in some visual traditions doesn't detract from the musicality of the scene, which is nonetheless conveyed through the triangulation between Guru Nanak, Bhai Mardana, and his *rabab*. When the halo is present, I sense the pulsing energy of the subtle body as drawing this symbol into a sympathetic vibration that amplifies sound, song, and their reverberation through the frame.

The long history of the halo in ancient Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, Mughal and, as examined in this article, Sikh art, shows a longstanding human interest to capture bodily aura and corporeal vibration—to make perceptible an energy that exudes from the body, like the powerful rays of the sun, and which lies beyond the immediate perception of the eye. The halo forces the spectator to reckon with the aura of divine energy as the metaphysical is conjoined with the physical realm through this mediating symbol. It is easy to claim that the use of the halo in Sikh art is a mainstay of the Mughal tradition. However, my focus on how this ubiquitous, universal symbol is aligned with the Sikh notion of *anahad naad* highlights the vibrational intensity of the halo, allowing its reverberations to resound through the imagined vocal and instrumental timbres of Bhai Mardana's *rabab* and Guru Nanak's voice.