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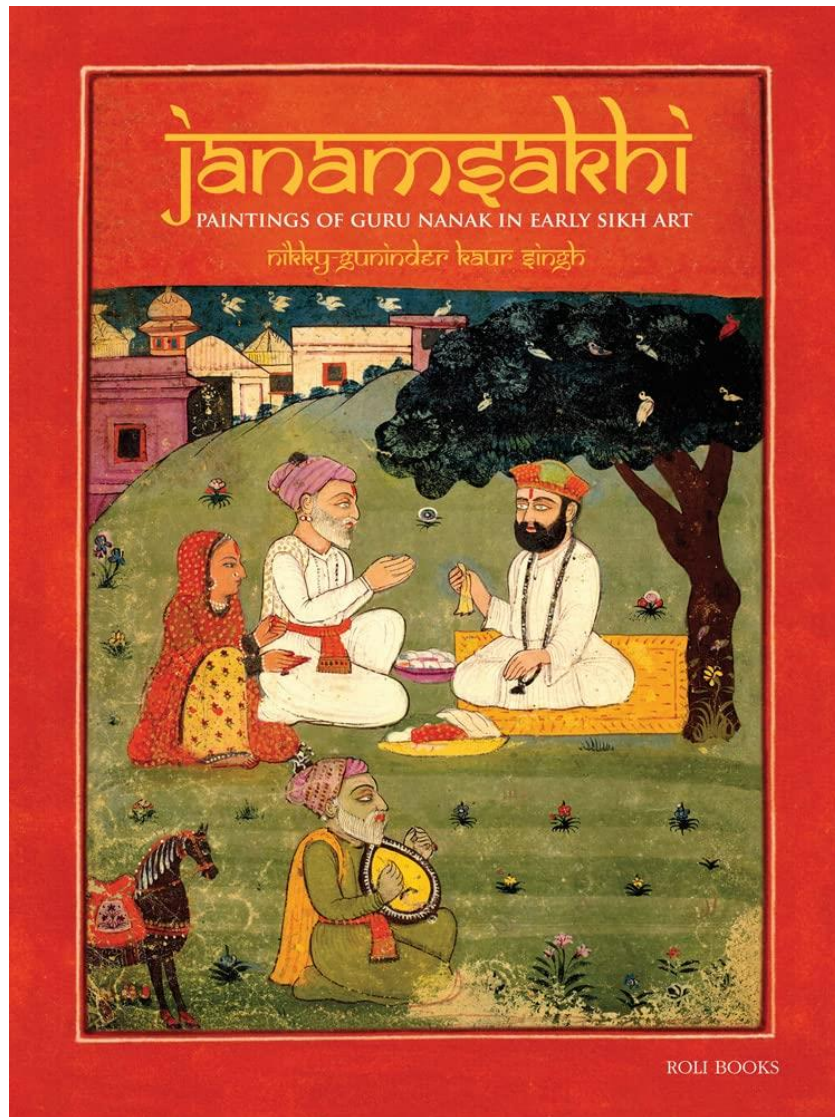
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Book Review

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Janamsakhi: Paintings of Guru Nanak in Early Sikh Art

Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh,

Roli Books, 2023

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On January the 9th, 1907 CE, a Lahori bookseller named H. Abdur Rahman arrived at the India Office Library in London and offered a small but beautifully illustrated, handwritten book for sale. It was written in a Gurmukhi script and titled, 'A Life of Nanak (Janamsakhi)' and was dated 1733. According to the entry made in the library's date book that day, the manuscript contained 'a large number (over 50) of miniatures, was in a fair condition, and must be regarded as a rarity.' Abdur Rahman seemed to be in a hurry to get back to India. So, the library acquired the manuscript for all of ten pounds.

Thus began the scholastic journey of a rare piece of semi sacred and historic Sikh artifact, henceforth known as the MS. Panj. B40 Janamsakhi, from the title it was catalogued under, belongs to a genre of Sikh literature by the same name. The Janamsakhis (lit. birth stories) were early, mostly oral, anecdotal accounts of the life of Guru Nanak (1469-1539), that first appeared within a century of his passing. Later, many of these were recorded in manuscripts by the faithful. Some even supplemented by beautifully executed illustrations.

The B40 manuscript is precious because it is the third oldest surviving text from its genre, and unique in one other aspect. Not only does it carry the date of its completion, but also the names of its patron, the scribe, and the artist who illustrated it. From it we know that it was commissioned by a devotee named Bhai Sangu Mal, was inscribed by a khatri named Daia Ram Abrulu, and illustrated by a tarkhan named Alam Chand Raj. Alam Chand seemed to be a very talented artist for his miniatures are not only detailed but of very high quality.

It takes an exceptionally inspired scholar to engage with such an unusual combination of 18th century Sikh history, Sikh literature, and Sikh art, and then render it relevant to the twenty first century reader. Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, the Colby Professor of Religious Studies, is one such scholar who does all that in her latest book, **Janamsakhi: Paintings of Guru Nanak in Early Sikh Art**.

As one goes through this beautifully produced book—a work of art in itself, it becomes obvious early on that Nikky Singh is not only an expert on Guru Nanak's life and philosophy, but she is also a fairly sophisticated art historian and critic, for Singh approaches each picture in three carefully measured but distinct steps—as a

piece of art, as a testimonial of Guru Nanak's life story, and finally, as a manifestation of his philosophy.

Singh calls the B40 Janamsakhi an iconotext—an evocative combination of pictures and script that conjures up emotions far beyond both. Through the photo essays that accompany each of the fifty-seven paintings, Singh pays homage to Alam Chand's considerable artistic abilities and speaks to his remarkable understanding of the Guru's timeless message. In her narrative, even the supernatural anecdotes are transformed into easily understood metaphors, highlighting the underlying concepts of the Guru's philosophy that address the social, political, economic, and environmental challenges of his times. Her descriptions are simultaneously illustrative and educative, spiritually uplifting and aesthetically pleasing. For example, she writes, "Alam Chand begins his set with a little a seven-year-old Nanak escorted by his father is making his entry to meet with his teacher. This is his first day at school. He 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") tight 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." From there, she goes on to connect the scene with the development of the Gurmukhi language. "Alam Chand's introductory scene," she notes, "*brilliantly introduces the Sikh religion. Derived from Sanskrit shisya, Pali sekka, the word sikh refers to a learner, a seeker. A dignified young Nanak enters a school – a space designed for writing, questioning, interpreting, reflecting – clutching a wooden board of the sort (takhti or pati) used by children for writing till recent times. His grip of the writing board foreshadows the Gurmukhi script he started and in which the entire Guru Granth Sahib is written as are the janamsakhis. Parallel to the Arabic script for the holy Quran and Sanskrit for the sacred Vedas, Gurmukhi would be the script for writing his new revelation. His acrostic Pati Likhi recorded in the Guru Granth Sahib underscores the oneness of the Creator. Most of its 35 stanzas begin with a letter of the Gurmukhi alphabet, in the very form that they are in use today. The wooden pati is a metonymic marker that its holder would write up a new religiosity.*"

Kaur Singh has effectively turned the picture into a brilliant backdrop to educate the reader on the evolution of the Sikh faith, the Gurmukhi language, and its script. Kaur Singh's analysis makes it appear as though the author herself has become an artist, her narrative a scholarly palimpsest with artistic, historical, philosophical,

and spiritual themes all layered one atop the other. Together these highlight Alam Chand's masterpieces, created in the folk-art style of Rajasthani Malwai school of art on one hand, and on the other, Guru Nanak's own interior and exterior journeys, his innate humanity, and his refreshingly liberal outlook that would be remarkable even today.

Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh's book is not the first such work on the subject, for there have been others, including an earlier monograph in Punjabi, titled the *Janam Sakhi Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji* (Amritsar, 1974) and a very comprehensive English translation by W.H. McLeod, simply called the *B40 Janam-Sakhi* (Amritsar, 1979). However, Nikky Singh comes across as a different kind of a scholar who is also a firm believer, yet one whose faith does not compromise but rather enhances her scholarship. Thus, the same Janamsakhi literature that McLeod deems 'lethal' to Sikh philosophy is 'Vismad' for her—wonderous—a fundamental component of Nanakian tradition. Her book weaves the visual aesthetics with the scholarly in a way that it indulges the senses while enhancing the mind.

This book should be of interest to a wide range of readers—the lovers of art, the students of Sikh history, philosophy and literature, the imaginative and the inquisitive, and all others willing to enjoy the immersive experience into the remarkable life and message of Guru Nanak. Along the way, the reader will learn how that message was received, understood, and transmitted by the 18th century Sikh faithful.