



Aesthetic and Artistic Appreciation of B-40 *Janamsakhi* Manuscript

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ABSTRACT

Janamsakhi manuscript deals with the first Guru of Sikhs, Nanak Dev. Janamsakhi means birth stories of Guru Nanak. The sakhis (stories) in Janamsakhi manuscripts were like an artistic instrument to spread and share the teachings of the Gurus more effectively with the help of visuals as these facilitated the understanding of thought and helped the people to relate to the age and the legend. The popularity of Janamsakhis in the society increased due to their usefulness. Most of the people were illiterate at that time, so these paintings in Janamsakhi were a easiest way to teach the doctrines of Sikhism to the people. These paintings upheld the Sikh aesthetics to reinforce spirit of the Janamsakhi tradition.

KEYWORDS

B-40 Janamsakhi, Janamsakhi Manuscripts, Guru Nanak Dev, Religion, Art

Introduction:

A look at history reveals that in every era, saints and *Pirs* have emerged as social reformers. They preached and made the people conversant about religious and moral values. Art too has contributed in this reformation and through art the teachings of these saints spread over foreign shores. It is clear that in the spread of religious teachings, art along with literature has played an important role. Same endeavor has been made through the main Punjabi literature *Janamsakhi*, which are embellished with beautiful paintings.

Janamsakhi manuscript deals with the first Guru of Sikhs, Nanak Dev. Janamsakhi means birth stories of Guru Nanak (Janam means birth and sakhi means stories). The word 'sakhi' has originated from Hindi or Sanskrit word 'sakshi' which means 'seen with own eyes' or 'testimony'. It also means to see or feel the words of saints with one's internal eyes.¹ The sakhis (stories) in Janamsakhi manuscripts were like an artistic instrument to spread and share the teachings of the Gurus more effectively with the help of visuals as these facilitated the understanding of thought and helped the people to relate to the age and the legend.

There have been four dominant traditions of Punjabi Sikh literature. Janamsakhis and Gurbilas, Vedantic literature, Scholastic poetry (Riti literature) in Braj language and Kissa poetry.² Of these four literary traditions, the one which became the most famous amongst the Sikh faith was the Janamsakhi genre. The Sikh followers strived hard to propagate Janamsakhis amongst the people and were also successful. In fact, the Janamsakhis provided a desirably simple method to guide people to a religious path by sermonizing religious teachings through stories connected with the birth of Guru Nanak. The Janamsakhis have been divided in four main traditions. These are: Puratan, Mihaarban, Bala or Bhai Bala, Gyan Ratnavali or Mani Singh Janamsakhi.³ The most exquisite and the significant Janamsakhi is B-40 (1733 A.D) which comes under Puratan tradition. This Janamsakhi is preserved in India Office Library, London and is acknowledged by accession number B-40. Historically, the Janamsakhi gives chief importance to the subject matter of miracles of Guru Nanak. Miracles have always been an integral part of every kind of spiritual exercise. Therefore miracles cannot be rejected outright in Janamsakhi.⁴ Most of the stories of these miracles are fanciful and in the rest, there is a philosophical or religious message behind their fancifulness.⁵ Janamsakhi was basically a medium to inculcate faith in illiterate people. Janamsakhi manuscript literature and paintings were successful in accomplishing this task. The tradition of Janamsakhi stories was a source of inspiration not just in 16th to 18th centuries but even today.

It was compiled mainly by Daiya (or Daya) Ram, a Khatri of the Abrol sub-caste and the artist who made the paintings was Alam Chand who was a mason by caste.⁶ In common parlance, the language of B-40 Janamsakhi is mixed Punjabi. Talking of language, the compiler of B-40 picked up its material from current oral traditions of that time. The language used in the B-40 Janamsakhi is so artistic as is not found in any other language of the time, viz., Hind Arya Language, Urdu, Braj, Gujarati, Marathi, etc.⁷ The B-40 manuscript contains fifty-seven illustrations. All these illustrations appear at the start of each sakhi. Each painting depicts a sakhi (story). The paintings of the B-40 Janamsakhi were made on separate paper and pasted in the manuscript later on. A careful examination of Janamsakhi paintings shows that these are quite realistic. All paintings have been executed in fine detail. Their colour scheme is quite impeccable. The depiction of garments, ornaments and atmosphere is largely interesting. In spite of all these factors, these paintings are very useful because these are the only source through which people come to know about the contemporary way of life of that time.

It has been specified that along with art, feelings and emotions also evolve; especially, the intellect of a person improves greatly. Art is of great help to any particular person in understanding situations presented by an artist, giving horizon to his vision along with bringing about an improvement in his personality. It is commonly said that art influences the common man quickly. At the same time, it helps to give additional depth to the field of experience of the viewer. The Janamsakhi art, too, made its beginning in the society with a particular aim in view.

Art plays an important and basic role in the evolution of society and tradition. It can never be divorced from it. Art is an effective tool in the hands of society which can change the mind, values, faith, wishes and attitude of any person. Art helps a person to maintain peace and harmony with the world. Art (Kala), in fact, is a Sanskrit word which means growing from roots (kal). It means to inspire and to motivate and to achieve bliss thereafter.⁸ A close examination reveals that all these qualities are present in Janamsakhi paintings. These paintings changed people's attitude to bring in and awaken a new faith whose very aim was society's welfare. Further, these painting created a feeling of peace and tranquility among the people.

The whole of ancient Indian painting and sculpture have been evolving on religious and philosophical principles only. They gave to the whole world a highly emerging art. Since ancient

times, religion and art had a single goal which was the attainment of salvation (liberation). It was mainly art which was instrumental in propagating religion to the common masses. Janamsakhi paintings are a very apt example of this. Their main aim was the propagation of Sikh doctrines or Sikh religion. Janamsakhi artists brought themselves to the level of a common man and then created this art. This made it easy for the common man to understand it because this art had the quality of attracting people. Moreover, it was a wholly useful art which in addition to giving joy to the people also conveyed to them an important message.

In Indian art, inner beauty has always been more important than outer beauty. In Janamsakhi paintings, this feature can be easily felt. In addition to the elements and principles of art, more importantly, these paintings inculcate the aspects of 'Satyam Shivam Sundram' because it was a true art and not falsehood or deception. In the Indian thought, real beauty is something when 'Satyam Shivam Sundram' is enshrined in it. It means that only that can be beautiful which is true and also has goodness, culture and spiritualism. These Janamsakhi paintings are a beautiful illustration of spirituality and teachings of Guru Nanak. Janamsakhi paintings create a feeling of inner affinity or soul. The soul means 'Shiva'. So, what is true is also 'Shiva', and what is 'Shiva' will naturally be beautiful.⁹At the same time, these Janamsakhi paintings are fully in accordance with the principles of all the six limbs or canons of Indian art. The earliest description of the six limbs is found in the Kamsutra of Vatsayana.



Along with these features treatment of composition, colours, brush technique and line too have full denotation. The artist Alam Chand Raj had used earthen and vegetable colours. These vegetable colours were made from plants, flowers and vegetables. Like green colour from leaves and yellow colour from haldi, red colour from geru, etc. In these miniature paintings, brush work is so minute that such fineness can only be achieved by the hair of squirrel or camel. The artist has shown high horizon in the paintings. Artist possessed a good sense of perspective. The knowledge of the perspective is evident in all these paintings, because artist has shown the distant objects in miniature form. The main emphasis is largely on Guru Nanak as compared to any other person or object. Symbolically, Guru Nanak has a canopy of tree over his head a symbol of his spiritual royalty. The sky is shown in limited space and main focus is on birds which are shown flying in the sky as well as sitting on the fruits laden trees. Compositions are not

overcrowded and there is a simple depiction of every element. Every figure and component is made according to its status and its use in the composition. A real composition is one in which there is complete and harmonious mixing of elements of art and principles of art. So it seems that artist had appropriate knowledge. The most important positive aspect of Janamsakhis has been that unlike the other Indian miniature manuscripts where there exists no relationship between text and illustration, there is complete relation between the two in the Janamsakhis. The paintings have been executed fully according to the text. Apart from this Janamsakhi paintings has a fine impact of Mughal, Rajasthani and Pahari paintings.

The popularity of *Janamsakhis* in the society increased due to their usefulness. Most of the people were illiterate at that time, so these paintings in *Janamsakhi* were a cagiest way to teach the doctrines of Sikhism to the people. These paintings upheld the Sikh aesthetics to reinforce spirit of the Janamsakhi tradition. Artist Alam Chand demonstrated these paintings with such dexterity in B-40 *janamsakhi* manuscript that these paintings find equivalent place to that of famous Indian miniature school.

Conclusion:

Art plays an important and basic role in the evolution of society and tradition. It can never be divorced from it. The whole of ancient Indian painting and sculpture have been evolving on religious and philosophical principles only. They gave to the whole world a highly emerging art. Since ancient times, religion and art had a single goal which was the attainment of salvation (liberation). It was mainly art which was instrumental in propagating religion to the common masses. Janamsakhi paintings are a very apt example of this. Their main aim was the propagation of Sikh doctrines or Sikh religion. B-40 Janamsakhi artists brought themselves to the level of a common man and then created this art. This made it easy for the common man to understand it because this art had the quality of attracting people. Moreover, it was a wholly useful art which in addition to giving joy to the people also conveyed to them an important message. These paintings changed people's attitude to bring in and awaken a new faith whose very aim was society's welfare. Further, these painting created a feeling of

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