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The Reception of Sikh Gurus Devotional Arts in Practice

Abstract:

Sikh devotional arts play a significant role in creating Sikh identity and its manifestations in Punjab (Pakistan). Therefore many Sikh families display and cherish Sikh devotional icons in the form of posters and other popular mediums to help maintain and create a relationship with a personification and reception of the Sikh Gurus. Based on an ethnographic survey in various cities, this study investigates the Sikh devotional arts in practice particularly in both domestic public spaces where such devotional arts elicit love tears for ardent believers. Judging from an ethnographic survey, it was exposed that for many Sikhs these popular devotional images warrant a specific vision that elicits visual piety.

Keywords: Devotional arts, Domestic spaces, Reception, Identity, Visual Piety

Introduction

Devotional art is popular across all castes, religious groups and religious minorities in Punjab, as well as other provinces in Pakistan. Mass produced art that proliferated in the twentieth-century has produced a symbiosis by its naïve visual, inter-religious appeal and its sheer ubiquity. The prints collectively, through their millions of ways, not just in the number of viewers, but also in the innumerable subjective responses they elicit consolidate to build an internally referential landscape that has come to exist in a parallel system of rituals throughout Pakistan.

Like in popular Islam, popular Christianity and popular Hinduism, the common Sikh visual culture also relies on the representation of the ten Sikh Gurus as well as popular hagiographic literature based on the teaching of the Gurus and religious verses by the Gurus and other religious figures which plays a significant role in creating Sikh identity and its manifestation.

The Sikh doctrine is a mystical tradition that began in fifteenth century northern India with the teachings of Guru Nanak, or Nanak Dev. The Sikh tradition born at

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the confluence of two oceans (the ‘Majma-ul Bahrain’)¹ of the Islamic and Indic world has never rejected its roots with both these great religious traditions. The same Guru who founded Amritsar and built the Harimandir Sahib (Golden Temple) was also built mosques and temples for the diverse Indic traditions (Luis 2009, 278). Sikh religion radiates around the teachings of Nanak Dev. Subsequently there were the nine other spiritual leaders or Sikh Gurus. Guru Granth is supposed to be the eternally living Guru has not manifested himself so far. The ten Gurus are as follow: First: Guru Nanak (1469-1539); Second: Guru Angad 1504-1552 (ordained Guru 1539-52); Third: Guru Amar Das 1479-1574 (ordained 1552-74); Fourth: Guru Ram Das 1543-1581 (ordained 1574-81); Fifth: Guru Arjun 1563-1606 (ordained 1581-1606); Sixth: Guru Hargobind 1595-1644 (ordained 1606-44); Seventh: Guru Har Rai 1630-1661 (ordained 1644-61); Eighth: Guru Har Krishan 1656-1664 (ordained 1661-1664); Ninth: Guru Tegh Bahadur 1621-1675 (ordained 1664-1675); Tenth: Guru Gobind Singh 1666-1708 (Guru 1675-1708).

The teachings of all Gurus compose the core of Sikh belief and are embodied in the Adi Granth, the holy book of the Sikh (Brown 1999, 34). Every Sikhs in the world spends life in accordance with the light of popular verses of last and tenth Guru named Gobind Rae in 1666, later renamed Gobind Singh. He brought about radical and lasting changes in the community.

This paper investigates the reception of Sikh Gurus in the form of popular mediums. The methodological foundation for this research study, its meanings and function and reception, are based on ethnographic survey which involved direct observation of the displayed visuals and interviews of the interlocutors in their domestic and public spaces from 2016-2017.² In this context Sarah Pink argues that the materialization of the visuals their meaning in the context where they are displayed can be studied at the site of production, the image itself and in the social context of its reception (Pink, 2003, 179-192).

Anthropologist Victor Turner argues that an observer has a wider and better overall perspective of a ritual than a participant who is in the midst of the action (Turner, 1995, 45-49). I agree with this idea in every sense. Mentally I positioned myself sort of at the periphery of the lay beliefs of people in order to get an overview of the interlocutors themselves (and also by the way not to be astounded by some of the things I heard). This vision allows one to appreciate certain “ways of seeing” as important avenues for understanding values, interests and symbolic discourse. When researchers apprehend this vision, this may produce ethnographic knowledge.

¹ The Majma-ul Bahrain was the title of a book on comparative religions by the Mughal Prince Dara Shikoh (1615 to 1659) who was a Sufi mystic in belief. The title means the confluence of the ‘two oceans of religions’ in India, Islam and Hinduism.

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The story of the Sikh religion starts back in 1469, in the small town of Nankana Sahib in Punjab (present day Pakistan, some forty miles away from Lahore) earlier known as Talwandi Rae Bhoë where Nanak was born to a Hindu family. Before the century was out, Nanak had the revelation that led to the founding of the Sikh faith and his place in the heart of all Sikhs as Guru Nanak Devji, that is, 'Nanak, the Respected Teacher' (Brown 1999, 30). Among the above mentioned Gurus, two of them can be regarded as far above the others; the first and the last and of these one emerges as paramount, who is of course Guru Nanak, the founder of the religion and he is portrayed as the supremely wise sage and Guru Gobind Singh who was the heroic warrior.

Since Guru Nanak first revealed the religion there are innumerable stories about him and in the popular art of the Sikh icons his representation surpasses that of the mighty tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh (McLeod 1994, 16). The hagiographic treatment of Guru Nanak may be generally divided into two segments. One is oral accounts of his life, which were eventually written down as the *Janam-sakhis*. The *Janam-sakhis* are still widely read today and their stories are endlessly related to Sikhs of all ages. The other one is in the popular art of the Sikhs. Wherever there are Sikhs, whether in their domestic or public spaces; on walls, shelves, in photo frames and other prominent places there will be displayed representations of this popular art in the form of posters, icons, calendars etc. In these pictures Guru Gobind Singh is certainly prominent, but he is featured less frequently. There are no known portraits of Guru Nanak and others that were done in their lifetime. Therefore there are no details of their actual facial features. However the whole Sikh visual culture of either high art or popular art is based on the above common interpretation of their images.

The available images seem are painted in a mythologizing idiom. Sobha Singh (1901-1986) a renowned artist of the twentieth century painted a famous portrait of Guru Nanak which became the standard icon for devotion in the twentieth century among Sikhs the world over. He made this portrait in honor of the 500th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak in 1969 and this has come to be the accepted interpretation of the visage of the venerated sage. He painted several series of other Sikh Gurus as well which now embody the public's perception of the images of these revered personalities of the Sikh religion, like his portraits of Guru Gobind Singh, Guru Amar Das, Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Har Krishan (Brown 1999, 45).

During my field research particularly in Nankana Sahib, the city named after the holy sage, where there is a sizeable Sikh community and the *Gurdwara Nankana Sahib* is situated, I had only limited access to areas of Sikh patrimony. I could only mainly survey public spaces. The *gurdwarah* is a public space however no representations of any of the Gurus were found there except a few finely written texts of hagiographical stories from Sikh history and culture; similar as in Muslims *mosques* and *maddrasahs*), unlike in Hindu *mandirs* and Christian churches in which figures of deities and Holy Prophets are primary features. Moreover I was told that the majority of literate middle-class Sikh families do not display or keep images of Guru Nanak. Usually only holy verses of scripture are exhibited. This aspect is similar to that of Islamic Wahhabi (salafi) tenets who do not believe in venerating saints teachings and all figural representation is strictly forbidden. On

the other hand, many public spaces such as shops in Nankana Sahib and in a few places in Lahore, Faisalabad as well as Rawalpindi are adorned with various popular prints representing Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh. Also I was informed that there are resplendent religious portraits displayed at strategic places in the famous golden temple of the Sikhs, that is located in Amritsar in East Punjab, India and popular pictures of the first and last guru also adorn other *gurdwarahs*.

Reception of Sikh Gurus

Icons of Guru Nanak are popular among Hindus as well as Sikhs. Scenes of particular episodes in the *janam-sakhis* (the traditional 'biographies' of the Guru) are also represented by art of this kind, but the most popular representation are simple portraits of the Guru. The picture in figure 1, shows a framed picture of Nanak Sahib displayed above the door in a middle class home in Lahore (incidentally with torn curtains). Like all other mass-produced posters, this picture also does not depict the name of the painter, but probably it was painted by the great Sikh painter Sobha Singh mentioned before. This is a very popular image of the Guru: a long white beard, head bowed, rapt in deep thought and mystic meditation. The visage gives the impression of a wise sage and a fatherly figure. It is in this image that "Baba Guru Nanak rules the hearts of all his disciples, Hindus as well as Sikhs" (McLeod 1994, 33). The sense of communion with divinity and the kindness conveyed by the figure make the icon a powerful object. The effective presence of the Guru's image is closely tied to the emotions generated in the hearts of the believers who dwell in this house.

The interlocutor of this house explained that;---although this is an imaginary picture however it bridges the gap between humans and Guru Sahib because it evokes feelings in every viewer who looks upon it. These feelings evoke the desire to live a better life, pray with greater devotion and feel healing comfort.

Many Sikh families display and cherish such icons to help maintain and create a relationship with a personification of the Guru and for ardent believers these elicit love tears. In the context of the display of these devotional images and their relationships with the viewer, a classical scholar and trained historian David Freedberg comments in his book "*The Power of Images*" that;---we must take into account not only the beholder's responses and feelings but also the impact, efficacy and vitality of images themselves. We have to study not only the behaviour of the beholders, but also the meaning of the images; not only human responses to the replication of the revered figure, but also what they expect the replication to achieve for them as well as why they have such expectations from it (Freedberg 1989, xxii).

Another scholar, David Morgan argued that to understand the relationship between the beholder and the devotional image, one needs to analyse the visual practice of structuring a ritual to look upon the image --- the gaze, (Morgan 2005, 2-6). In this connection, I apply Arjun Appadurai's (1986) idea of social and cultural imagination describing the dynamics of fashioning imagined association stimulated by different visual interactions with the image.

The consumption of images by devotees needs to be understood by studying these processes of bodily empowerment, which transform pieces of paper into a

powerful divine force: the votary's venerating gaze, the presence of the facsimile of a reality and a whole repertoire of physical actions. The basic mark of the palpable quality of these images' – their ability for corporeal transformation – is their non-absorptive directness. (Pinney 2004, 193). The vast majority of images behold their owners directly, engaging and returning their gaze. Anthropologist Christopher Pinney cites Diane Eck that:

--- the primacy of sight as an idiom of articulation between deity and devotee is lexically marked so that devotees will usually stress that they are going to their subjective temple for *darshan*, to see and be seen by the deity: it is this 'exchange of vision that lies at the heart of Hindu worship (Pinney, 193).

However in the context of Hindu devotional art, Pinney suggested that the *darshan* relationship that devotees cultivate engages vision as part of a unified sensorium. The eye in *darshan* is best thought of as an organ of tactility, an organ that connects with others. Walter Benjamin states in his classical work "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (2008) observes that the urge to have an interaction at very close range with some object that has religious associations because of its likeness, its reproduction grows stronger daily. This has generally been read as a sign of the ineluctability of encroaching media practices that have increasingly virtualized the world.



Figure 1: A framed picture of Guru Nanak Sahib displayed above the door in a middle class home in Lahore. Picture: From author's archive.

Many Islamic theologians say that to deify an object or picture and pray in front of it is a form of idolatry, similarly among more literate Sikhs many believers maintain that an imaginary picture of a Guru has no power therefore it cannot help the beholder in any way. It is a fact that many people do not always listen to the

Sikh religious scholars and they keep and cherish these religious images to the point that their devotions fuse the symbol with the referents. Many Sikhs have intimate and powerful relationships with their Gurus and treat their pictures as more than inanimate objects. As noted above, the popular impression of Guru Gobind Singh is quite different from that of Guru Nanak. In the portraits made by bazaar artists he is clearly depicted as a royal figure, the Lord of the Khalsa. He is shown as a young man, dressed in magnificent clothing with richly-embossed weapons of steel. His beard is black, slightly forked with the tips of the moustache turned up and his person is adorned with jewellery. Characteristically, pictures of Guru Gobind Singh portray him as a king, at once defiantly militant and abundantly rich (McLeod 1994, 34).

For instance figure 2 is that of a living room of a Sikh family in Nankana Sahib where a poster of Guru Gobind Singh is displayed along with family photos. The Guru is depicted as a wielder of the -----sword with his white falcon. A chart of hagiographic episodes of the life of the Guru, strongly emphasising his manly strength and physical bravery is hung above the other pictures.

According to the interlocutor of this house that; --the picture of the Guru Gobind Sahib brings benediction and protection to the other family pictures as well as to the home, although it is an imaginary portrait of Guru Gobind ji, however I feel that it is the exact representation of him. Because of it all my family members pray to God through him. Moreover it teaches us to be a brave nation as our Gurus have been.

In the context of exactness of the painted or printed portrait Richard Brilliant rightly comments that;---the first requisite of a portrait is that it should be an accurate likeness of the subject. Regarding the other qualities of execution, composition etc. “experts” can judge these better, but in respect of whether the painting is a true likeness does not require much skill or knowledge; anybody who has seen the subject can assess this (Brilliant, 191, 25).



Figure 2: A poster of Guru Gobind Singh (Right) is displayed along with family photos in Nankana Sahib. Picture: From author’s archive.

In the case of these religious icons the lay devotee is the best judge as to whether the representation is a faithful likeness of the Guru or not. Because though neither

artist nor devotee has ever seen the subject Guru and the icon is purely imaginary, but the popularly accepted and idealized depiction is what the devotee associates most with the image and thereby evokes a reaction of beholding something holy. Therefore this ingrained, preconscious observation of the senses and no particular skill is all that is required to qualify him or her to testify to it. Many Sikh devotees admire the devotional paintings of Sobha Singh which are absorbing and commanding. The material art quality of the twentieth century posters of Gurus is worth contemplation and its artistic quality must be distinguished from its religious character.

Those who venerate Muslim saints, Hindu deities, the Prophet Jesus (AI), Holy Mary and other revered personages, often seek from their painted or carved images to find succor from disease and chronic ailments, cure sick children, a last resort for some disability or alleviation or healing of some description or maybe just comfort in misery. David Morgan states in his book “Visual Piety” that; --- the believer is physically specifically endeavoring to achieve what we may call the visual piety of popular religious images. Often they are seeking deliverance from ailments and anguish. Their worship is both an aesthetic experience and a desire for betterment and ease; there is nothing “disinterested” about this vision (Morgan 1998, 31).

Though a *prime facie* impression of Sikh posters might make them seem similar to Sufi posters as described earlier in this thesis, but there are distinct nuances of difference. In the first place regarding the themes of the posters; the Sufi ones are more narrative, depicting miracles, incidents of the lives of the saints, often featuring their prominent disciples and their shrine has to be shown. On the other hand Sikh posters emphasize the character of the subject Guru or Gurus. Usually they only present the portrait of the Guru (mainly Guru Nanak or Guru Gobind Singh, though sometimes all ten Gurus are displayed and occasionally Guru Nanak is shown with his two famous disciples). The pictures highlight the popular image associated with these Gurus. They are some of the finest and fullest depictions of religious, nineteenth-century painting in the subcontinent. They are widely printed and circulated throughout India, a bit in Pakistan as well as in Sikh diaspora abroad. As for the believer’s relationship with the posters, they are basically an assertion of their faith; a sign of their veneration and a *via media* to be closer to their religious personages. Judging from my survey, for many Sikhs these popular religious images warrant a specific vision that elicits visual piety. They gaze at these portraits of the Gurus and feel that they are present. They sense their presence in all they do in life.



Figure 3: A famous poster of Guru Nanak sahib displayed in a Sikh shop in Nankana Sahib. Picture: From author's archive.

Figure 3 shows a popular picture of Guru Nanak in another famous image of him. It is displayed in a Sikh's shop in the city of Nankana Sahib. The poster is displayed on the front of the establishment and catches the eyes of every customer and passer-by. To the Sikh shopkeeper and Sikh customers the devotional image is a promise; it is the future. The wisdom of Guru Nanak comprehended the mystical and the unseen, which includes what lies ahead. The upraised hand is an assurance to wait. Everything is proceeding according to a divine plan that the Guru understands.

It must be noted that there is an element of militancy in Sikh hagiography. Nanak Sahib represents the supremely wise teacher and peace and assurance in meditation and knowledge, no doubt aware but transcending a more heroic and fighting role of the religion. This aspect is embodied in the figure of Guru Gobind Singh. Together these two provide a more or less comprehensive view of the Panth, which indeed has a militant aspect but yet possesses in the figure of Guru Nanak a very different approach to life. In other words the Sikhs seem to be forthright God-fearing people noted for their militancy (Mcleod 1994, 18).

It may be said that in the Panth these two roles are clear-cut and Guru Gobind Singh, Lord of the Khalsa, stands supreme in representing the aspect of the warrior fighting spirit. However, in popular religious literature, Guru Nanak is referred to more frequently and portrayed with greater diversity of character. This diversity is reflected in Sikh poster art as well. Figure 4 is a poster displayed in a Sikh's shop in Rawalpindi. This framed picture of Guru Nanak has great meaning for the shopkeeper. He informed me as follows; --- I have a similar picture at home as well. The picture of the Guru ji means very much to me and my family. It is full of love, compassion, empathy, kindness and gentleness. I love Guru Nanak ji with spirit and truth. The picture of Guru ji hangs onto the picture of my father and this shows that he is under the protection of Guru ji.



Figure 4: Another poster of Guru Nanak sahib displayed in a Sikh shop in Rawalpindi. Picture: From author's archive.

The Sikh shopkeeper keeps seeing both pictures all day long till he closes his shop. When he glances at it while working or when he gazes directly up on it; both these forms of viewing serve as a familiar contact that immediately evoke a religious heightening in him, which goes to the heart of popular visual piety. The tangible image of the picture with its devotional contents as well as its simplistic beauty gives the viewer a satisfying experience of perceiving a particular understanding of Guru Nanak, in other words, the image fits the viewer's ideal. Therefore in my view, in such cases of highly evocative art, perception is more important than veracity and if the image elicits the desired response it has served its purpose. We cannot retrieve what Guru Nanak really looked like, so this image does not serve to reconstruct his appearance but to remind Sikh believers what he stood for; to assure them that they may reach heaven.

In the context of such popular art, David Morgan quoted Emile Durkheim's classical definition; --- popular art is essentially a conventional art which restates in an intense form, values and attitudes already known; which reassures and reaffirms, but brings to this something of the surprise of art as well as the shock of recognition (Morgan 1998, 33).

In light of Durkheim's definition, it is suggested that the aesthetic experience should not be limited to disinterested contemplation because the viewer responds to the accepted genre of beauty portrayed; in this case gazing devotedly on popular pictures of Gurus. This however flies in the face of many modern philosophers of art who maintain that the only legitimate aesthetic experience is an organization of feelings that meets some standard of civilized development and not one with no purpose but its own enjoyment. This argument would relegate the practice of looking devoutly at pictures of Gurus to being only a religious experience, not an aesthetic one. Moreover daily life is full of people continuously and subjectively adopting, testing, thinking about and ratifying a plethora of ever-changing doxy opinions, personal beliefs and predilections that form much of what Pierre

Bourdieu calls the *habitus* of a person; the “system of dispositions” that comprises the symbolic universe in which we live. (cited in Morgan 1998, 5).

The anthropologist Michael Taussig, however, has suggested a different approach. He gives another interpretation to Walter Benjamin’s concept of ‘optical unconscious’ that is relevant to ethnography, particularly in the above context. Taussig sees ‘optical unconscious’ not as a fervid flash of faith in a secular world that is full of materialism and scientific thinking, which has replaced all ‘magic’ and superstition. He perceives a corporeal domain in which such viewed objects through sensory impact can gain significance as being part of a ‘magical technology of embodied knowing’. Taussig’s re-reading of Benjamin permits us to rethink the ways in which local devotees can get affected by mechanically, mass-produced images. In all art there is a corporeal element which now has a different meaning to what it used to have. One factor through which Sikhs, Christians, Hindus or Muslims of the subcontinent are able to evolve a mythos behind religious posters is through the creation of a zone of mutuality that encompasses the devotee and the image: the ‘locking in’ of a vision to which our treatise keeps returning. This relationship is clearly expressive of the Hindu concept of *darshan*, which involves paying homage in the presence of the deities and receiving their blessings, or as in the case of these posters, the holy personages that are depicted in them. However we must note that this is not just a specific ritual of this particular cultural/religious practice. To understand the concept of *darshan* we have to appreciate that it isn’t only imaginary dancing attendance on a prescribed deity, there is an element of what we might call mythological or folk lore reality and a nuance of fineness in popular Indian religious ‘visuality’. Actually underlying this ritual there is a very widespread practice of what Pinney termed ‘corporetics’ (sensory corporeal aesthetics, implies fusion of the devotee’s aesthetics into the religious purpose and the efficacy of the religious purpose becomes the sole criterion of the beauty of the venerated object/icon, (Pinney, 2004, 193). By coining the term “corporetics” Pinney seeks to recapture the ancient Greek meaning of aesthetics as “perception of feeling” grounded in the corporeal and material and simultaneously rousing the senses. (Pinney,19). His book shows beautifully how this broader understanding of aesthetics opens up new aspects of inquiry into mass-produced religious images that reveal not so much how they look but what they can do.

Conclusion

Sikhs community in Pakistan have an old tradition of using holy relics to cure illnesses, blessing children and also other objects and bringing benefaction and prosperity to their homes and businesses. Like believers regard Sufi posters, Sikhs venerate representations of their Gurus, the primary one being those of the founder of the religion, Guru Nanak. However, these images may not be in the usual poster art genre and some pictures are artistic and realistic. Even in the poster art genre the emphasis is to portray a definite human character. He is often manifested as a kindly, benevolent figure having immense knowledge even of the unseen and a venerated teacher. Because of persecution by the Mughals in history, Sikhism has a militant aspect and this is manifested in the image of Guru Gobind Singh. These posters bring protection and benefaction and also serve as a form of spiritual communication with the revered Gurus. However, my study of the reception of

Sikh gurus in domestic and public spaces of the Punjab showed that according to many interlocutors particularly those who are literate, Sikhs do not believe in these devotional posters, and feel since they are imaginary they cannot embody the Guru. Instead they believe in their holy books. This notion is similar to Wahabi sect among Muslims. They have an austere belief and reject Sufi saints, shrines, *pirs*, music, figural representation, ornate graves and devotional forms of Islam.

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