

The earliest known *janam sakhi* was written in 1658; 120 years after the death of Guru Nanak Dev. References of Guru Nanak Dev's life can be found in other works but none of these give an insight beyond the *janam sakhis*. Even if the stories in the *sakhis* are fables, then as fables, they reveal the attitudes and values of Sikhism's earliest followers. This is rich research source.

JANAM-SAKHIS THE FABLE-IOUS CULTURAL HERITAGE

At a recent auction of Indian antiques in London, a single leaf of an 18th century *janam sakhi* was sold for £390 (about Rs 33,450). A complete *janam sakhi* manuscript would have at least 150 pages. If each page were of similar quality, that would make the entire manuscript worth Rs 50.17 lakh.

A person who purchases an antique manuscript may not have any feeling of reverence for it. The same *janam sakhi* that in Punjab would be kept respectfully wrapped in a *rumal*, would be merely an item for display abroad, perhaps just one of many old manuscripts, for a non-Sikh. Indeed, a buyer might think only of holding it for resale at a higher price later.

Those who sell such old manuscripts often say "They will be more carefully preserved by foreign collectors than is possible in their homeland", and perhaps this is true. At the same time, these works are the cultural treasures of Punjab, and individuals and institutions here that have risen to the challenge of preserving them deserve special gratitude.

One such institution that not only collects and cares for old *birs* and *janam sakhis* but ensures that they are kept as hallowed texts is Chandigarh Government Museum. Its manuscript section holds several *janam sakhis* dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries.

Most of the Sikh manuscripts in the collection were presented by Dr Man Singh Nirankari. They had been lying in different gurdwaras in Pakistan and were brought to India by the Army and given to the SGPC.

Because of their dilapidated state, they were to be burnt after performing the rituals. Some, however, bore the word "Nirankari". These were retrieved by a friend of Dr Nirankari and turned over to him.

The museum has digitised the whole collection so that this material, precious to scholars of art and history as well as to devout Sikhs, can never be lost to fire or theft. The digitisation work was carried out by the Nanakshahi Trust, an S.A.S. Nagar-based NGO. The trust aims to digitise as many old Sikh manuscripts as it can find, including those held by the SGPC, Guru Nanak Dev University, Khalsa College-Amritsar, Punjabi University, Language Department and Patiala Archives as well as private collections. Eventually, these digitised manuscripts will be made available as an online library, allowing scholars from anywhere in the world to study them.



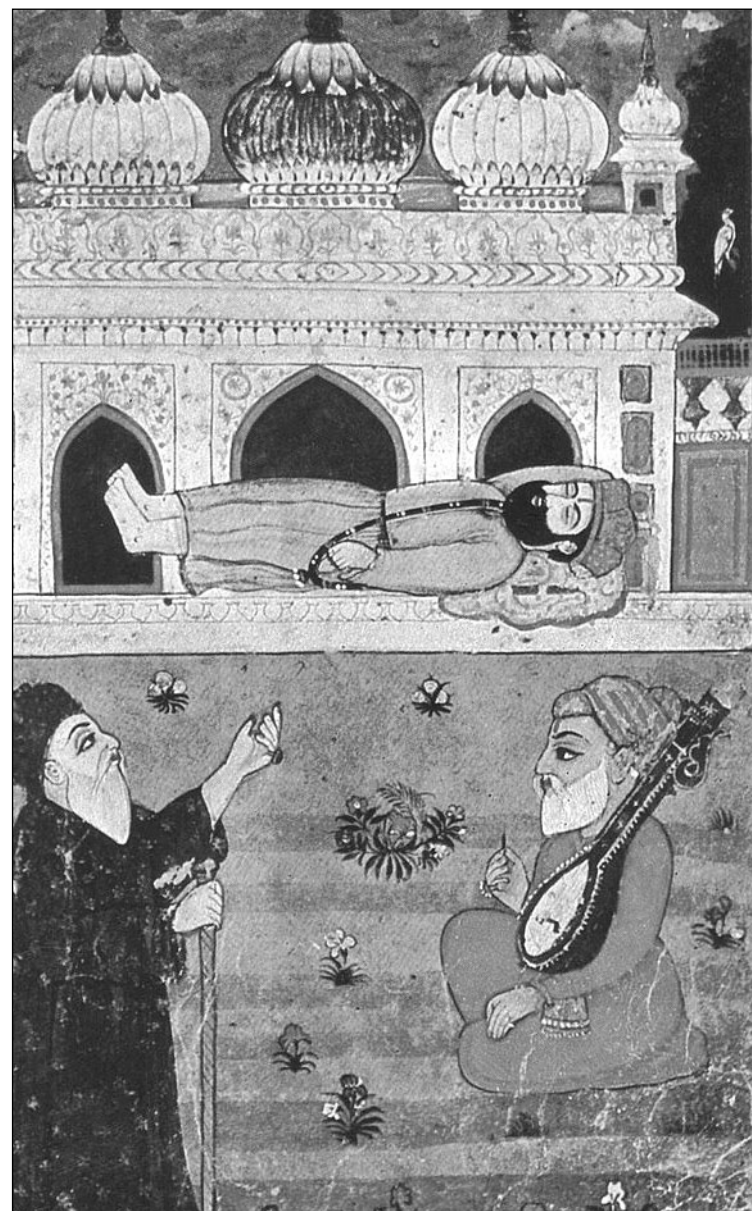
Scholars, of course, have their own world, but what do the old *janam sakhis* mean to the average person? Even someone who considers himself well informed about the Sikh religion may have only a sketchy idea. For instance, there are many different collections of stories (*sakhis*) about the life (*janam*) of Guru Nanak Dev. No two collections include exactly the same stories in the same sequence. Of the many *janam sakhis*, four are regarded as "major". These are the Puratan, Meharban, Bhai Bala and Bhai Mani Singh *janam-sakhis*. Another biographical work, although of a different type, was written by Bhai Gurdas. Of his 39 *vars*, the first sheds light on Guru Nanak Dev's life.

In 1926 Bhai Vir Singh compiled stories from several *janam sakhis* and his version of Guru Nanak's life became very popular, but it is not ancient.

Some scholars question the value of the *janam sakhis* as historical sources and describe the stories as mainly expressions of pious imagination. Clearly, some elements of these stories have to be understood as allegorical or figurative and not literally factual.

At the same time, there are elements in the stories that are echoed elsewhere. For example, the *janam sakhis* relate the stories of Guru Nanak's travels. If these are just a lot of made up stories, then why is there a Gurdwara Nanak Shahi in Dhaka, a Gurdwara Pathar Sahib in Ladakh, and a Panja Sahib in Pakistan?

Why are there inscriptions recording the visits of Guru Nanak in Sriranga Temple in Tamil Nadu and at Rameswaram? A 16th century inscription at Kandy in Sri Lanka records that



"Nanaka-charya came to Sinhaladwipa and at the instance of the king spoke with the priests". Nanaka-charya sounds a lot like Guru Nanak.

The Guru's visit is also recorded on an inscription in Baghdad. Then there are people the Guru is said to have met during his travels: Qazi Rukn-ud-Din in Mecca, Shah Bahlol in Baghdad, Pir Bahvel Haq at Bahwalpur, Shah Bu Ali Qalandar of Panipat, Sheikh Ibrahim and Mian Mitha, Sant Kabir at Varanasi and other persons who find mention in other historical accounts.

The earliest known *janam sakhi* was written in 1658; 120 years after the death of Guru Nanak Dev. References of Guru Nanak Dev's life can be found in other works but none of these give us an insight beyond the *janam sakhis*.

Even if someone says that the stories in the *janam sakhis* are fables, that does not discredit the historical data that are found in them. Moreover, even as fables, they reveal the attitudes and values of Sikhism's earliest followers, so in this respect also the *janam sakhis* have great historical importance.

Not all *janam sakhis* enjoy the same high esteem. For instance, the Meharban *janam sakhi* is named for Sodhi Meharban, who was closely associated with the Mina sect and the Minas were very hostile towards the Gurus around the period of Guru Arjan Dev. The Minas were the followers of Prithi Chand, eldest son of Guru Ram Das. Guru Ram Das chose his younger son (Guru) Arjun Dev to succeed. The Mina sect gradually disappeared. It is believed that Bhai Gurdas wrote to counter the Mina *janam sakhi*. In contrast, the Bhai Bala *janam sakhi* had an immense influence

over determining what is generally accepted as the authoritative account of Guru Nanak Dev's life. This work concentrates on the Guru's *udasis* and it became very popular. The writer claims to be Bala Sandhu, and the Guru's companion on the long journeys, he also says that Guru Angad asked him to write the stories in Samvrat 1592. However, some inconsistencies have led historians to the conclusion that another writer took the name of Bhai Bala and this writer was strongly influenced by the Handiali sect. The problem with this *janam sakhi* is that the language used was not spoken at the time of Guru Nanak or Guru Angad, but was developed at least a hundred years later; at several places, expressions like "Waheguru ji ki Fateh" are used, but these came in only during the time of Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708). All this makes scholars believe that the Bhai Bala *janam sakhi* was written in the early part of the 18th century. Bhai Mani Singh, a disciple of Guru Gobind Singh, wrote the third major *janam sakhi*, which is also called the Gyan Ratanavali. At that time, the Sikhs were concerned about the Mina's misinformation. Bhai Mani Singh said that they could rely on the *vars* of Bhai Gurdas but people wanted a more detailed version. When the work was completed, he presented it to Guru Gobind Singh who approved it.

The fourth major *janam sakhi*, the *Vilayat Wali janam sakhi*, was written by Bhai Sewa Das in 1634. This hand-written manuscript was taken to England by one H.T. Colebrook in 1815 and handed over to the East India Company's Library in London. That is why it is called "Vilayat Wali". The *Hafizabad janam sakhi* is a copy of this work.

Some scholars question the value of the *janam sakhis* as historical sources. Clearly, some elements of these stories have to be understood as allegorical or figurative and not literally factual..

