

Kanika Singh. *The Story of a Sikh Museum: Heritage, Politics and Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025, pp 226.

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The Story of a Sikh Museum: Heritage, Politics and Popular Culture, consisting of five chapters, is an incisive exploration into how a museum's affiliation with religious institutions constructs collective memory. Focusing on the Bhai Mati Das Museum, housed within the landscape of the Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib in Old Delhi, Kanika Singh examines the narratives that surround museums, objects of historical value, and visual culture, which shape the Sikh community's representations of its past. In doing so, she creates an analytical space that brings art history, community narratives, and museum studies together, while remaining attentive to the realities of faith and modernity.

The book begins by introducing the reader to the origins of the museum and its association with sacredness through a public exhibition. Visitors enter barefoot and with covered heads, just like one does in a gurdwara. Singh characterises these spaces as "devotional archives." Through interviews, fieldwork, and visual analysis of the exhibits, Singh offers an insider's account of the museum's form and examines how representation becomes a participatory act rather than a static display. Singh delves into the process of the paintings, which she characterises as "bazaar art," the manner in which they made their way into the museum, and how they were designed to engage with their viewers. The museum, in this context, not only invokes Sikh identity but also serves as a visual memorial for the martyrs, a site for political contestation, and a representation of the community's heritage.

The Punjab and Sind Bank became a proponent in defining Sikh visual memory as part of a larger process of art, heritage, identity, and political interlinkages (ch. 2). Between the 1970s and early 2000s, the Punjab and Sind Bank commissioned a series of paintings on Sikh history for its annual

calendars. These works, produced by artists trained in realism, were later donated to the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee and became part of the Bhai Mati Das Museum's collection. Interviews with artists reveal how visual conventions adhere to contemporary ideals of Sikhism, the Khalsa form, and the five symbols of faith, as well as historical accuracy, while developing "feelings" (p. 32) on a canvas for the viewer to not only observe the art but also connect with it personally. Even gestures that seem timeless, such as a Guru pointing heavenward, are shown to be modern inventions legitimised by contemporary devotional expectations, both in their choice of themes and their use of specific visual elements. These paintings, therefore, mark a decisive shift from regional miniatures to a visual language that is realist in form and style sensibility.

Each painting of the Sikh past is represented as a chosen theme, accompanied by an explanation in Punjabi, English, and sometimes Hindi. The language employed for these explanations, therefore, becomes crucial in understanding the objective of the paintings being commissioned: to instil Sikh ideals within the upcoming generation and to consolidate the past for the existing one to recollect and remember. Singh observes that the mode of representation employed at Bhai Mati Das simplifies the community's evolution into what it is today. The paintings depict the lives of the Gurus and martyrs in a linear historical narrative, characterised by traits of righteousness and advancing heroism. The omission of modern episodes, such as the Partition, reveals the limits of this visual theology, as indicated in the third chapter.

The fourth chapter, *Sikh Heritage and Its Politics in Contemporary India*, extends this analysis into the public sphere. It discusses the celebrated episode of Baghel Singh's conquest of Delhi in 1783, along with slogans of "Delhi Fateh" (p. 72) in farmers' protests, which have broader historical relevance to establishing one's own identity in the political narrative across time, using "visual othering" of a community, in this case, the Muslims, portrayed as antagonistic figures within specific narratives of Sikh history (p. 61). Singh demonstrates how museum imagery participates in everyday cultural production, transforming heritage into a visual language within contemporary political spheres. The chapter closes by asking why, if these narratives are already widely available, they are not more widely known.

The present work demonstrates a remarkable understanding of Sikh ideals and their application in the construction of Sikh history and the emerging Sikh museums. The work employs not only historical methodologies of oral narratives and visual art to inquire into the pre-existing narratives of museums, but also presents a new domain for the historical and archival study of Sikh history, opening an area of prospective research among historians in which one can employ these methods and use the present work to understand that narratives aren't always state-crafted. Instead, they are often oriented towards the formation of social ideals, identity and culture, especially in relation to communal histories. Sikh museums signal the community's continuing negotiation of identity within a nation striving to reconcile pluralism with unity. Singh traces the overlapping networks of patronage, religious committees, government bodies, and private donors that sustain these projects. Across these contexts, the museum serves as both a devotional archive and a statement of belonging in the realm of India's modern polity.

The Story of a Sikh Museum is, thus, more than just a study of a single institution. It delineates how art, faith, and politics converge to shape collective memory. Singh's meticulous fieldwork, evident in well-structured appendices and lucid analysis offered by the text, reveals that heritage in contemporary India is not a passive process but an active, contested one. The book's clarity and depth make it a significant contribution to the scholarship on South Asian visual culture, religious identity, and the politics of representation.