

Introduction

Guru Nanak's Transcendent Aesthetics: Setting the Stage

Guru Nanak's vast corpus of 974 compositions recorded in Sikh scripture, the *Guru Granth Sahib* (GGS), is sublimely beautiful. They register his numinous experience of the all-inclusive transcendent One (*ikkoankār*) vibrant within and all around in a "wonderful variety of poetry of the most astonishing literary quality" commends Christopher Shackle.¹ For Guru Nanak, "transcendent" does not mean beyond the material, "aesthetics" is not different from religion. Transcendent aesthetics is the material religion of Guru Nanak. Imbued in his love for the singular divine who colors diverse beings animate and inanimate in this very multiverse, Guru Nanak's verse speedily flows out in perfect rhythm and spontaneously shapes into linguistic somersaults, verbal arabesques, and other affective artistic patterns. While establishing intimacy with the infinite One, the physicality of his poetry enjoys an ontological relationship with bodies of this vast cosmos. The unicity Guru Nanak aesthetically experienced and transmitted, materialized as the 1430-paged scriptural body – comprising the individual and collective identity of twenty-eight million Sikhs worldwide. Venerated, seen, sung, recited, heard, addressed, the textual Guru draped in silks and brocades is a vital presence in every sector of life. To taste the delight (*bhuncāi*) of its epistemological textures is stated in the epilogue of the GGS (p. 1429). Indeed, the dynamic Sikh religion was generated by and continues to be sustained on the first Sikh Guru's transcendent aesthetics.

Philosopher Sher Singh rightfully singles out Guru Nanak on the world stage: "The emphasis and the stress which the Guru lays on the aesthetic side of our emotions does not exist in any other theological system."² And yet surprisingly, the aesthetic dimension barely receives centerstage.

¹ Christopher Shackle, "Survey of Literature in the Sikh Tradition." *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Pashaura Singh & Louis Fenech (eds.). Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 111.

² Sher Singh, *Philosophy of Sikhism*. Lahore: Sikh University Press, 1944, p. 174.

D. S. Maini, a noted scholar of literature, explains why. "Somehow the prophet has so eclipsed the poet that, in talking of his message and vision, people are apt to focus exclusively on his mystic and numinous experiences."³ Guru Nanak's works do tend to receive enormous scholarly attention for inaugurating Sikh theological doctrines, ethical systems, and institutions, and they receive enormous sacramental significance in the daily private and public life of the community. But sustained attention to Guru Nanak's *experience* – "mystic and numinous" – even by its ardent proponents, is missing. Eighty years ago, Sher Singh took the community to task for neglecting "the emphasis and the stress which the Guru lays on the aesthetic side of our emotions." Sher Singh reminds them that the God of the Sikhs is "a Being who gives complete aesthetic satisfaction," but he is disappointed with the community's response:

never have such teachings of a religious prophet been so indifferently and superficially taken up by his followers as is done by the Sikhs.⁴

The philosopher's urging went unheard, and some decades later literary critic Attar Singh again advocated for an aesthetic reception of Guru Nanak's works. The Guru's fifth birth centennial in 1969 was celebrated with wild enthusiasm. In his honor Guru Nanak Dev University was established in Amritsar, Guru Nanak Chairs were established at several universities, two Guru Nanak institutes were set up, seminars and symposia were held on various university campuses. In and outside of the Punjab Guru Nanak Studies received a major boost, nevertheless:

Aesthetic evaluation of the poetic art of Guru Nanak as also his place in the literary history of the Punjab or India were relegated to a minor position in academic discussion . . . the academic dilettantism in the language avoided engagement with the theoretical as well as practical aspects of literary evaluation of the works of Guru Nanak. For the most part, the scholars were engaged in projecting the message without any attempt to correlate it with the medium.⁵

Today the academic study of Sikhism is flourishing internationally with Chairs in Sikh Studies established in major universities in India and abroad, journals devoted to the history and culture of the Sikhs, and knowledge being produced in various disciplines by scholars both Sikh

³ D. S. Maini, "Sublime Humanism of Guru Nanak." *Sikh Review*, Calcutta, March 2000.

⁴ Sher Singh, *Philosophy of Sikhism*, p. 174.

⁵ Attar Singh, "Punjabi: Mainly a Guru Nanak Year." *Indian Literature*, 13 (December 1970), pp. 69–76.

and non-Sikh. With a few exceptions, Guru Nanak's aesthetics is unfortunately still being treated "indifferently and superficially."⁶

In *Beyond the Written Word*, William Graham provides important historical context for how the study of religion has privileged the written word. He exposes the "incapacity" of major scriptural scholars across traditions to appreciate the "sensual dimension" of religiousness: "They have known scripture so intimately that it has passed into the fabric of their thinking and discourse and provided the conceptual matrix as well as the inner linguistic content of that thinking and discourse."⁷ We find Sikh scholars so absorbed in theological matters that they overlook the multi-sensory dimensions of the GGS. Doctrinal, ethical, and historical constructs receive the spotlight, and as I have brought up before, even the process of translation suppresses the sensuous textures of his verse.⁸ At some level Neeti Sadarangani is correct: "The reverence surrounding the Sant has done more harm to the poet Nanak, than good."⁹

This present volume enters that absence. I explore Guru Nanak's "aesthetics," which I regard as a symbiosis of his prophetic revelation, his poetic genius, and his pragmatic philosophy – embedded in his phenomenological experience of the transcendent One. Here standard binaries and classifications collapse; rationality is not deemed above revelation, nor reason over emotion nor intellect over intuition. Guru Nanak's revelation of the absolute One encompassed all beings and things, and so poured out poetry full of passion and compassion naturally, artistically. The prophet-poet is also the pragmatist philosopher who sought "practical consequences": he intended his wide audiences to experience that borderless unicity and enact upon it, and so he consciously launched several aesthetic exercises like *Sangat* (togetherness), *Kirtan* (divine praise), *Langar*

⁶ Some exceptions are: Taran Singh, *Guru Nanak: His Mind and Art* (New Delhi: Bahri, 1992); G. S. Mansukhani, "Guru Nanak's Conception of Aesthetics," Taran Singh (ed.) *Teachings of Guru Nanak Dev* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2001); Sant Singh Sekhon, *History of Punjabi Literature* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1993); Michael Nijhawan, "From Divine Bliss to Ardent Passion: Exploring Sikh Religious Aesthetics Through the *Ḍhāḍī* Genre," *History of Religions*, 2003; and some of my works including "Corporeal Metaphysics: Guru Nanak in Early Sikh Art," 2013; N. G. K. Singh, "Guru Nanak's Sensuous Metaphysics," *Sikh Formations*, April 2019.

⁷ William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 165.

⁸ Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, "Translating Sikh Scripture: Rebounding Sound and Sense." *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Religion*. Hephzibah Israel (ed.) Abingdon: Routledge, 2023, pp. 480–494, and "Translating Sikh Scripture into English." *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, 3 (1) (2007), pp. 33–49.

⁹ Neeti Sadarangani, *Bhakti Poetry in Medieval India: Its Inception, Cultural Encounter, and Impact*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2004, p. 152. However, I find Neeti Sadarangani's classification of Guru Nanak as "Sant" problematic.

(community meal), and Seva (selfless service) that have evolved into central “Sikh institutions” (see Conclusion).

The poet delving into spiritual and epistemological speculations happens to be a captivating songster and a jeweller too! He identifies himself as a *shāir* (poet) whose flesh and breath belong to the infinite One, and as a *dhādhī* (songster/bard) employed by his infinite Patron. And we also catch him working as a jeweller/goldsmith/minter (*suniāru*) crafting a gold coin of the numinous word (*sabadu*) for the enrichment of his society (Chapter 5).¹⁰ His role as a jeweller is confirmed by GGS bards Satta and Balvand (GGS: 967; Chapter 5). His expanded portrait helps us appreciate the founder Sikh Guru’s unmatched artistry with its universal appeal. In his imaginings of truth and beauty surface contemporary sociopolitical concerns through lush alliterations, vibrant imagery, innovative metaphors, joyous rhythms, and memorable rhymes. The message and the medium, the Prophet, the Poet, the Songster, the Jeweller, and the Pragmatist Philosopher, seamlessly coalesce in Guru Nanak’s aesthetics. I would say the title “guru” in Guru Nanak’s case is a shorthand for his omniscient personality.

Guru Nanak’s multifarious persona is captured in a glorious tribute by the national poet of Pakistan, Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), regarded as the greatest Urdu poet of the twentieth century. I cite again poet Iqbal’s unforgettable praise for Guru Nanak:

butkada phir bād muddat ke magar raushan huā
nūr-e-ibrahim se āzar kā ghar raushan huā
phir uṭhī ākhīr sadā tawhīd kī Punjab se
hind ko ek mard-e-kāmil ne jagāya khwāb se

Ages later the house of idols was lit up again –
 Azar’s house was lit up by the luminous Abraham
 Once more from the Punjab unicity was finally decreed
 A perfect person awoke India from its sleep.

Bang-e-Dara

For the Muslim poet, Nanak is the perfect person (*mard-e-kāmil*) for illuminating the Punjab with his vision of unicity (*tawhīd*). He compares the Sikh Guru with the luminous Prophet Abraham, the son of Azar and the spiritual ancestor to the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religions. Just as

¹⁰ I have used the terms “jeweller” and “goldsmith” interchangeably to translate the single word “*suniāru*” because the majority of the *suniāru*’s work was not in fact minting coins, but creating gold adornments. Similarly, “songster” and “bard” are used to translate *dhādhī*.

Prophet Abraham brought the light of monotheism to his idolatrous world, Guru Nanak enlightened India with the divine One (Islamic *tawhīd*, Sikh *ikkoankār*). Poet Iqbal also provides us with a nuanced rationale for the popular public memory “*Baba Nanak shāh fakīr, hindu kā guru musalmān kā pīr*”; simultaneously king (*shāh*) and penniless (*fakīr*), Baba Nanak is guru for Hindus and *pīr* (saint) for Muslims. Thus we are simultaneously clued into the intersensory, sensory-motor, sentient-cognitive interconnections of Nanakian aesthetics – igniting unity among Abrahamic and Indic people, and beyond.

Alexander Baumgarten in Germany was the first to use the term “aesthetics” and establish it as a distinct field of philosophical inquiry. Baumgarten wrote a two-volume work entitled *Aesthetica* (1750–58), derived from the Greek *aisthesis*, meaning perception by the senses. Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790) solidified aesthetical as a subjective experience, not an objective cognitive judgment, and consequently not logical. Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) further categorized three realms: religion, ethics, and aesthetics, with the aesthetic stipulated at the bottom rung. Philosophy got separated into logic, ethics, and aesthetics, the goals of which respectively are the true, the good, and the beautiful. Aesthetics has been denigrated as something “sensuous” pertaining to the material and the secular, and separate from the domain of knowledge, morality, God, or the transcendent. Terry Eagleton succinctly sums up the prevailing division: “not between art and life but between the material and the immaterial: between things and thoughts, sensations and ideas, what is bound up with our creaturely life of perception as opposed to what belongs to the mind.”¹¹ The two horizons viewed far apart come together in Guru Nanak’s aesthetics.

Applying a Western and relatively modern term “aesthetics” to our pre-modern Sikh Guru may seem incongruous. But, in fact, Guru Nanak’s “language of infinite love – *bhākhīā bhāo apāru*” (GGS: 2) itself is a ubiquitous fusion of aesthetics and love. His multivalent words *rasa*, *ishq*, *piār*, *muhabbat*, *bhakti*, *sneh*, *rang*, *prem*, *prīt*, *cāo*, *neh*, *lāl*, *calūl*, and so on simultaneously denote aesthetics and love – illuminating a linguistic coincidence I call “*aestheticophilia*.” “Aesthetics” is basically a heightened mode of experience: opposite of *anesthesia* (loss of sensation), opposite of *lethe* (oblivion), it is integral to knowledge, for doing actions, and in forging relationships. Moreover, its typical associations with pleasure are compounded in Guru Nanak’s empathy-infused aesthetics. Coined by

¹¹ Terry Eagleton, “The Ideology of the Aesthetic.” *Poetics Today*, 9 (2) (1988), p. 327.

English psychologist Edward Titchner in 1909, the word “empathy” is from the German term *Einfühlung*, “in-feeling.”¹² In our own times, Pulitzer Prize winner Elizabeth Wilkerson raises this feeling to “radical empathy” – “opening your spirit to the pain of another.”¹³ Evidently aesthetics is a dynamic perceptual process, and precisely because of its dynamism it fits in perfectly with Guru Nanak’s multifaceted literary constellation. The immediacy of his rapturous passion and of his heart-wrenching compassion are expressed aesthetically by him, and aesthetically they get impressed on his audience.

The academy at last is beginning to revive aesthetics as the medium for insight and knowledge. Modern scholarship in anthropology, phenomenology, mysticism, and cognitive sciences is effacing mind–body binaries, and promoting the importance of the senses and the body as an integrated unit in rational processes. Neuroscientist and psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett expresses this unity strikingly: “Your body is part of your mind, not in some gauzy mystical way, but in a very real biological way . . . This means there is a piece of your body in every concept that you make, even in states that we think of as cold cognition.”¹⁴ In “Aisthesis: Theology and the Senses,” Stefanie Knauss emphasizes the nexus of rational/scientific knowledge and experiential knowledge in post-modern epistemics.¹⁵ Scholar of religion S. Brent Plate recommends that “to learn about religion we have to come to our senses. Literally. We have to begin to discover . . . that we cannot know the worlds of any other culture, let alone our own, unless we get inside the sensational operations of human bodies.”¹⁶ This volume draws upon the rapidly growing subfields of Embodied Religion, Body and Emotion, Material Religion, Somaesthetics, Philosophy in the Flesh, Everyday Aesthetics, Eco-Ontology . . .

The creative and interdisciplinary approach of Mark Johnson holds particular appeal. A champion of the American pragmatist John Dewey, Johnson brings aesthetics back to the centerstage of all experience, thought, and action; from being supposedly inept for knowledge and

¹² Thomas Bragg and Sandra Weems, “The Great War Poets and the Campaign for Empathy.” *Emotions: History, Culture, Society*, 2 (2) (2019), p. 237.

¹³ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2020, p. 386.

¹⁴ Lisa Feldman Barrett cited by Kim Armstrong, “Interoception: How We Understand Our Body’s Inner Sensations.” Association for Psychological Science website, September 25, 2019.

¹⁵ Stefanie Knauss, “Aisthesis: Theology and the Senses.” *CrossCurrents*, 63 (1) *Aesthetic Theology* (March 2013), p. 116.

¹⁶ S. Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to its Senses*. Boston: Beacon, 2014, p. 8.

truth, aesthetics is pivotal for philosophy, science, morality, law, and art. My thesis is based on Johnson's account of aesthetics as an *embodied cognition*.

Aesthetics . . . extends broadly to encompass all the processes by which we enact meaning through perception, bodily movement, feeling, and imagination. In other words, *all meaningful experience is aesthetic experience*. . . . Without the aesthetic elements and processes of meaning-making, there could be no philosophy, no science, no morality, no law, and no art.¹⁷

The senses play a constitutive role in cognition, and circling back to Dewey, they fuse inseparably “to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive.”¹⁸ Bodily perfected perception was crucial for Nanak who saw his peers as out of touch with themselves and obsessing instead about conceptually systematized divisions – Hindu–Muslim, Brahmin–Shudra, male–female, this world–world beyond. The dynamic of the bodily senses would awaken the powers of awareness, imagination, feeling. As he addressed, spiritual knowledge of various texts (*pothī purāṇ*) is attained (*kamāīai*) only if this (*itu*) body (*tanu*) is touched (*lāgai*) by their languages (*bāṇiān*) (GGS: 25). Conjoining affectivity with thought and action, Guru Nanak's philosophical ideals, moral compass, and the unique praxis he set into motion in medieval North India are undeniably *aesthetic*. His language is sensuous such that it activates the consciousness and a reader/listener reflexively relates with something vaster. Where laws fail, the emotional force of poetry can physically move people out of their insularity and make them *do* things for the collective good.

Nanak was born into the Khatri mercantile community in the Punjabi village of Talvandi (now in Pakistan). He was married to Sulakhni, and they had two sons. He was close to his older sister Nanaki. After her marriage he even lived in her home in Sultanpur Lodhi, where he worked in the employ of its Muslim governor. In Sultanpur he had a divine revelation (see Chapter 5); enamored by that One, Nanak began to sing praises in the vernacular Punjabi while his childhood Muslim friend Mardana played the rabab (a plucked chordophone). His spiritual rapture was contagious. Men and women from all walks of life began to gather around him in the town of Kartarpur that he founded by the banks of the river Ravi, calling themselves *sikhs* (from the Pali *sikkha* students, seekers,

¹⁷ Mark Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought: The Bodily Roots of Philosophy, Science, Morality, and Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, p. 2 and p. 261.

¹⁸ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*. New York: Minton, Balch, 1934, p. 325.

learners). To taste the delights of the delightful One (epigraph) they came together (*sangat*) and sang songs of divine praise (*kirtan*), and together they cooked and ate (*langar*) while working selflessly (*sevē*).

In the broader context of Indian aesthetics, “*rasa*” is a central concept. Sanskrit-based *rasa* has no single corresponding synonym.¹⁹ It encompasses a host of meanings including juice, taste, savor, water, sap, elixir, nectar, flavor, relish, love, desire, beauty. Its earliest systematic discussion was by Bharata in his *Natya Shastra* (treatise on music and dance) almost two millennia ago. Ever since, *rasa* has generated elaborate theories on the refined essence of an object, its taste or flavor, the relishing by the taster, and a cultivated sensibility.²⁰ It is a technical term in the arts. *Rasa* theory generally applies to specific forms of literature, music, poetry, dance, and drama at an idealized and abstract level. As Sundararajan and Raina clarify, aesthetic appreciation “is not concerned with the personality-contingent responses of the reader in the real world, so much as the responses of an ideal reader in virtual reality.”²¹ The prototype of the aesthete is the theater-going *rasika* of Bharata’s *Natya Shastra*. In the safe space of the theater, real everyday human emotions (*bhava*) are transmuted by the actors into universalized emotional flavors (*rasa*) for audiences to relish. Developed over the centuries, *rasa* theory followed in Indian performing arts includes nine *rasas*: *Sringara* (romantic), *Hasya* (comic), *Karuna* (compassion), *Raudra* (fury), *Vira* (heroic), *Bhayanaka* (terrifying), *Bibhatsa* (odious), *Adbhuta* (wondrous), and *Santa* (peace).

The nine *rasas* are easily discernible in Guru Nanak’s capacious literary output. Maheep Singh mentions seven of them, and classifies *Santa* and *Sringara* as the dominant ones.²² Oddly, the two that do not make it into Maheep Singh’s enumeration are the *Bhayanak* and the *Adbhuta*. Yama, the god of death who often shows up with his “terrifying” noose of death, is a *Bhayanak* presence in Guru Nanak’s verse, and interestingly he also plays a “comical” role, for “at the end Yama is thrashed to the ground – *ant kāl jam mārāi t̥heh*” (GGS: 1257). While his poetry offers a range of *rasas*, the “wondrous” (*adbhuta* or *vismādu* in Nanakian lexicon) is the most

¹⁹ Sheldon Pollock’s impressive *A Rasa Reader* studies primary texts by major *Rasa* thinkers. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

²⁰ *Dhvanyaloka of Anandvardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*. Daniel H. H. Ingalls (ed. and trans.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

²¹ L. Sundararajan & M. K. Raina, “Mind and Creativity: Insights from *Rasa* Theory with Special Focus on Sahrdaya.” *Theory & Psychology*, 26 (6) (2016), p. 789.

²² Maheep Singh, “Guru Nanak: The Saint Poet.” Gurmukh Nihal Singh (ed.) *Guru Nanak: His Life, Time, and Teachings*. Delhi: Guru Nanak Foundation, 1969, pp. 223–235.

prominent. From the Sanskrit root *smi*, the word *vismādu* is etymologically related with the Greek *meidian*, to smile, and Latin *miraculum*, wonder. Guru Nanak's multifarious artistic designs *magically* evoke the singular infinite Reality vibrating in each corporeal form (*vismādu rūp*), coloring each atom of this pluriversal cosmos (*vismādu rang*) to be enjoyed each instant (GGS: 463–464).

The root *ras* appears abundantly as noun, verb, adjective, and so on in Guru Nanak's repertoire, but it is not an abstract contemplation or a virtual reality constructed by the process of idealization; *rasa* for the Sikh guru is the essential characteristic of the divine One immediately experienced in the everyday rhythms of life. It countervails art-centered aesthetic theories and attention to the philosophy of art. Rather than the conventional Indian abstracted perception of *rasa*, Guru Nanak's is more along the lines of "jouissance" adopted by French feminist philosophers – "explosion, diffusion, effervescence, abundance . . . takes pleasure in being boundless . . ." ²³ We hear the Guru sing of That boundless pleasure: "*āpe rasīā āpi rasu āpe rāvaṇhāru* — You are the enjoyer, You are the taste, You Yourself revel in all (GGS: 23). Guru Nanak's tiny segments comprise four, two, and five syllables; *r* alliterates in the first two and lengthens in the third (*ra*) rhythmically, musically, stretching *ras* into infinity. How can the aesthetic experience of living life without borders be confined to any system? Art resists rules and conventions. The "spontaneous outflow" (Taran Singh) and "systematized free style" (Rattan Singh Jaggi) classified as the hallmark of GGS as a whole, I claim, commences in Guru Nanak's aesthetics. ²⁴

Guru Nanak's aesthetics goes beyond theaters and museums into the practical everyday social, political, economic, environmental, and spiritual events and actions. The gist of his commonplace aesthetics is the unity of mind and body, poetry and philosophy, sacred and secular, physical and metaphysical, sensuous and transcendent, aesthetic and religious. All beings are equally authentic subjects with bodily faculties to enjoy the material substantial transcendent One in daily activities, and their sensate enjoyment is no different from cognitive knowledge. "Only a person who enjoys the fragrance can know the flower – *rasīā hovai musk kā tab phulu pachāṇai*" he stipulates (GGS: 725). The infinite One ever-present in every

²³ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*. Betsy Wing (trans.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 91.

²⁴ Taran Singh, "Sri Guru Granth Sahib." *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*. Patiala: Punjabi University, 1998, vol. 4, p. 250. Personal communication with Dr. Rattan Singh Jaggi.

tangible finite form of this multiverse is known by “percipient senses,” literally “*giān indre*” as noticed by Guru Nanak scholar Taran Singh.²⁵

Guru Nanak’s Transcendent Aesthetics is a lived trans-religiosity colored in love. Love has been the leitmotif of poets across religions – Bhaktas and Sufis, Jewish and Christian. What I find distinctive about Guru Nanak is an embodied borderless love for fellow beings in *this* world. His *aestheticophilia* is an infinite tapestry of *somatophilia* (love for “body/mind”), *theophilia* (love for the universal One), *biophilia* (love for the natural world), and *anthropophilia* (love for fellow beings) – voiced by our poet in the language of love. “The Poet,” defines Hans-Georg Gadamer:

is the archetype of human being . . . Therefore, the word, which the poet catches and causes to endure, does not mean just that artistic accomplishment through which one becomes or is a poet, but it also represents the essence of possible human experience. This allows the reader to be the I of the poet because the poet is the I which we all are.²⁶

Guru Nanak’s profound love for the infinite One expressed in simple, terse, sensuous rhythms draws in and carries readers along emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and bodily. An animated surge within shatters clogged prejudiced arteries, revealing ways of being in and inhabiting a vast liberative horizon. Built by *somatophilial*, *theophilial*, *biophilial*, and *anthropophilial* skeins, neurons, and tissues, Guru Nanak’s *aestheticophilial* corpus awakens audiences to an exciting new reality. As Mark Johnson would say, “It reveals our status as *homo aestheticus* – lovers and makers of embodied meanings and values.”²⁷

These four *philial* dimensions underlie my study. Soma translated “body/mind” is coined by Richard Shusterman to avoid what he calls the “Platonic-Christian-Cartesian” dualism.²⁸ Body infuses the mind; tellingly, Guru Nanak’s term “*manu*” (emotive thought) is a homonym for heart, mind, and for the individual self. Somatic awareness is consciousness, knowledge, memory, behavior, one’s identity. In my usage, *somatophilia* mind/body is the opposite of “*somatophobia*,” the chronic anxiety about the body that men and women across cultures have been suffering from. Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz diagnosed it as a bipolar

²⁵ Taran Singh, *Guru Nanak Bani Prakash*. Patiala: Punjabi University, 1969, p. 855.

²⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: *Applied Hermeneutics*. Dieter Misgeld & Graeme Nicholson (eds.), Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (trans.) Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, p. 77.

²⁷ Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, p. 260.

²⁸ Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 51.

glitch: the mind associated with the male/spirituality/theory/eternity/liberation, split from and privileged over the body associated with the female/sensory/practice/temporality/imprisonment.²⁹ Not only lovers of knowledge (philosophers) as we have been observing, but also most lovers of God (religious devotees) disparage somatic associations. Guru Nanak, to the contrary, sanctifies the body. The five senses are instrumental: they have the potential to develop morally and bring ultimate fulfillment, *or* they can degenerate into vices that destroy the self and relationships. He offers *somatophilia* as a distinctive way of conceiving, perceiving, and *enacting* through body/mind that organically grows into *theophilia*, *biophilia*, and *anthropophilia*. The five senses are healthy, holy, and wholesome requisites. Without them there is no action, thought, or feeling. Chapter 4 analyzes the vital role these sentinels play in Guru Nanak's aesthetics. His anatomical imagery rooted in the corporeal body emerges strikingly across this study.

Theophilia is the affective cognizance of the all-encompassing singular reality, and Guru Nanak's entire verse is saturated with his love for the One. However, his is not the monotheistic exclusive "One God" of the Abrahamic traditions, the "Creator apart from His creation" or "the transcendence of God" above nature and humans. His rejection of an exclusive external divine is echoed in the work of modern Christian theologians who are also beginning to question the distant monarchical model of God.³⁰ Guru Nanak feels that One as the Being of all biotic and abiotic beings here in this vast multiverse, and rejoices in all the bodies informed by that One. Bodily cognized, the knowledge of the immaterial One is gestured in a delighted Nanak trying to spin around the infinite One as we frequently see (Chapter 1). He spontaneously embraces the formless One in a variety of personal relations, and in a variety of terms current in his multireligious, multiethnic, multilinguistic Punjab (Chapter 3). His spiritual ache is deeply felt inside his visceral organ liver (*kalejā*), a corporeal interiority validated by contemporary medicine: "Feelings arise in the interior of organisms, in the depth of viscera and fluids where the chemistry responsible for life in all its aspects reigns supreme" writes neuroscientist Antonio Damasio.³¹ The somatic hub is the locus of Guru Nanak's infinite Beloved.

²⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 5.

³⁰ Christian theologian Sallie McFague, *Models of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987.

³¹ Antonio Damasio, *Feeling and Knowing: Making Minds Conscious*. New York: Pantheon, 2021, p. 95.

Biophilial is appropriated by feminist thinkers as a psychological and philosophical category. Biologist E. O. Wilson defines it as an “innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms.”³² Literally love for life, *biophilia* for feminist philosopher and theologian Grace Jantzen, counters the patriarchal order with its preoccupation with death and the other world central in most religions, and “reshifts the necrophilic” to life and living here on earth.³³ Pursuing the goal of personal salvation, religious people from most traditions emphasize heaven and the world beyond, and they end up repudiating this world – as did Guru Nanak’s contemporaries. His was a revolutionary voice that turned the focus from death and the afterlife to living *alive* here on earth with fellow beings in this multiverse, *feeling* the wonders of the wondrous One. From a tiny ant beside him to the largest star far in the distance everything is a member of the cosmic family; day and night are the caretakers on whose laps the “whole world plays – *khelai sagal jagatu*” (GGS: 8). All of natural phenomena is that One’s household (*eco* from the Greek word for household *oikos*). Nanakian aesthetics embraces earth ethics, one that values temporality, historicity, change, and passage. An enchanting plurality of trees, plants, flowers, animals, birds, elements, planets, constellations form the script of his sublime poetry – bringing us back to the mother’s body life, and to the bodies in this world we belong to.

Anthropophilia is Guru Nanak’s *theophilial* love extending to fellow beings. The infinite One informs each finite body, so the love for that One must reach out to everyone, irrespective of religion, race, gender, sex, class, or caste. Guru Nanak valued marriage, family, and the wider community, and initiated practices of Sangat, Langar, Kirtan and Seva to strengthen social-spiritual bonds. Participation with fellow beings is a catalyst for moral and spiritual growth. Dehumanizing artificially fabricated religious divisions and social inequities so acutely documented by Wilkerson in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent* (2020), were current in medieval north India. Against his society’s stipulated roles for different castes and stages of life (*varna ashrama dharma*) and different genders (*stridharma*, codes for women/*stri*), Guru Nanak championed *eko dharam* – the one moral compass for everybody (GGS: 1188).³⁴ “There is a light in

³² E. O. Wilson, “Biophilia and the Conservation Ethic.” *The Biophilia Hypothesis*. Washington DC: Island, 1993, p. 31.

³³ Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, p. 132.

³⁴ Dharma (from the Sanskrit root *dhr* to sustain, uphold) stands for religion, virtue, duty, propriety, morality, cosmic order, etc.

all and that light is the One – *sabh mahi joti joti hai soe*” (GGS: 13). That the spark in every man and woman be lit up in mutual love and respect to its fullest potential is fueled by his *anthropophilial* aesthetics – which again is contingent on the five senses. How we relate with others, how we understand others, how we feel toward others, how we act toward others – all these, as Andrew Rotter argues, depend on “how we apprehend them through every sense.”³⁵

These filial strands intricately woven across Guru Nanak’s life-affirming poetics and praxis were a paradigmatic shift in his body-denying, world-fleeing society. During his travels he met contemporaries from various schools of the Yogis, Naths, Siddhas, and Jains who feared the body and renounced the world. As a sign of “mastering” their sexuality or “death” of their body, ascetics from different traditions opted to wear little on their bodies, smeared themselves with ash, killed their hunger and desires, and took off to inhabit mountain tops, jungles, and even cremation grounds. Guru Nanak’s new religiosity denounces *somatophobic*, *biophobic*, *anthropophobic* attitudes and behavior:

Don’t heat your body like an oven
 Don’t burn your bones as fuel.
 Your head or your toes, have they done any harm?
 Hold on to your lover within.

GGS: 1411

Over and over, he urges ascetics engaged in condemning their bodies to nurture their precious gift.³⁶ His attitude anticipates the outlook of American feminist poet Audre Lorde, “the ascetic position is one of the highest fear, the gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes the ruling obsession. And it is not of self-discipline but of self-abnegation.”³⁷ Spurning asceticism, Guru Nanak lauds the body for its intimacy with the all-encompassing lover.

An important Sikh scholar of comparative religion, Trilochan Singh, underscores Guru Nanak’s life-affirming ethics that chartered a new path on the Indian religious map:

³⁵ Andrew Rotter’s thesis, *Empires of the Senses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 1.

³⁶ For more on Guru Nanak’s critique of renunciation, mendicancy, and austerities, see J. S. Grewal, *History, Literature and Identity: Four Centuries of Sikh Tradition*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 30–32.

³⁷ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic.” Judith Plaskow & Carol Christ (eds.) *Weaving the Visions: Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*. Harper & Row, 1989, p. 210.

Guru Nanak thus breaks away and stands apart from the Hindu-Buddhist-Jain tradition and counsels man against realizing his transcendent apart from society . . . The fundamental difference is that Sikh ethics is life-affirming, while Hindu and Buddhist ethics are dominated by the ethical idealism of the monk and the recluse and are life-negating³⁸

Guru Nanak directs audiences away from a self-centered life-negating existentiality toward an affirmative and broader humanity. Spiritual advancement and civic responsibilities go hand in hand. The religious and political conflicts in Guru Nanak's milieu made people insecure, so they withdrew more and more into their insular ways. Reflecting on the moral twilight of his society, he appealed to his contemporaries, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Yogis, and Siddhas alike, to give up external prescriptions and practices, and feel the palpitations of the infinite One. "Without enjoying the elixir, it's all a big mental drama – *binu ras rāte manu babu nātā*" he categorically states (GGs: 226). Sensorial spiritual feel takes precedence over scriptural recitations, ascetic practices, ritual baths, fasting, going on pilgrimages, all rules of purity and pollution. Intrinsic to his worldview, aesthetics became his approach to awaken the experiential, affective, and sensory dimensions of his contemporaries.

Unlike Plato who banned the poets from his republic because "poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up" (*Republic* Book 10, 606d), our pragmatist philosopher amply used poetry to drench his empathetically parched society in his prophetic vision of the all-inclusive One. There is no Platonic partition between poetry and philosophy: the categories of prophet, poet, pragmatist philosopher are fluid in Guru Nanak's case. Sikh historian Harbans Singh praises his compositions for their "abounding imagination and a subtle aesthetic activity," along with their enormous social significance: "Nowhere else in contemporary literature are the issues of the medieval Indian situation comprehended with such clarity or presented in tones of greater urgency."³⁹ Vital for the knowledge of reality, vital for moral behavior and communal life, Guru Nanak's poetics would bring about a change in society by revitalizing the senses, psyche, imagination, and spirit.

Of course, the long and complex past absorbed from immediate family and from society and state – cultural, political, religious – is not, as

³⁸ Dr. Trilochan Singh, "Guru Nanak's Religion: A Comparative Study of Religions." Gurmukh Nihal Singh (ed.) *Guru Nanak: His Life, Time, and Teachings*. New Delhi: Guru Nanak Foundation, p. 92 and p. 95.

³⁹ Harbans Singh, *Guru Nanak and Origins of the Sikh Faith*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1969, p. 216, and p. 206.

Gadamer says, easy to shake off.⁴⁰ Dewey identifies “The enemies of the aesthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the hum-drum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure.”⁴¹ The old stereotypical body-disparaging cultural norms and intellectual habits constructed by muscular patriarchal north Indian society seep into the understanding of Guru Nanak’s works. Masterly exegeses, popular translations, and public commentaries have primarily been from the pens and lips of elite male intellectuals, theologians, exegetes, preachers who with their inveterate tendency carry on harmful dualisms and exclusions. Suspicious of anything keyed to the body, to material existentiality, to the world here and now, they overlook the intimacy between Guru Nanak’s theological semantics and his sensuous poetics. His ethics of love and joy has been eclipsed by androcentric fear and exclusion. His *somotaphilial*, *biophilial anthropophilial* aesthetics is barely spoken about, and unfortunately, “in philosophy, what goes without saying typically goes without doing.”⁴² Inevitably Guru Nanak’s revolutionary body-sanctifying egalitarian home-life has become, Nicola Mooney tellingly exposes, the site from where “inequalities of gender subordination and caste hierarchy emanate.”⁴³ Guru Nanak’s innovative and empowering pulsations have yet to reach his audience. This study should therefore prove to be fruitful.

I.1 Importance

Transcendent aesthetics is the approach to study Guru Nanak’s theology, philosophy, and ethics for these are intricately integrated in his poetic syntax. Indo-Aryan linguist Michael Shapiro commends there is an “internal unity” between his linguistic structures and content.⁴⁴ “Aesthetics” is not some external embellishment, but the very medium of Guru Nanak’s sensory textures. His words are multivalent, his lyrics dynamic. There is no prose, no narratives, no deontological prescriptions that could be reified theoretically and doctrinally. Poetry is his method. Its

⁴⁰ “The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life” writes Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. New York: Crossroad, 1989, p. 276.

⁴¹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 47.

⁴² Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatic Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, p. 276.

⁴³ Nicola Mooney, “In Our Whole Society there is No Equality: Sikh Householding and the Intersection of Gender and Caste.” *MDPI Religions*, 11(2) (2020), 95.

⁴⁴ Michael Shapiro, “The Theology of the Locative Case of Sacred Scripture.” David Lorenzen (ed.) *Bhakti Religion in North India*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 157.

meaning does not lie in theory; it is in the embodied experience. We therefore cannot comprehend Guru Nanak's poetics in any nonaesthetic "efferent" stance which narrowly focuses attention to extract and accumulate information that a receiver can *carry away*.⁴⁵ To the contrary, we pay close attention by moving closer, *lingering on*, caressing his verse.

An aesthetic reading entails a fivefold process identified by John Armstrong in his *Move Closer: An Intimate Philosophy of Art*: (a) attention to details (*animadversion*), (b) seeing relations between parts (*concursum*), (c) seizing the complete whole (*hololepsis*), (d) *lingering caress*, and (e) mutual absorption (*catalepsis*).⁴⁶ A renewed intimacy with Guru Nanak's text integrates the ontological modalities of actuality and potentiality, unfolding new meanings and imaginative possibilities, new praxis-oriented responses and reactions. As Trilochan Singh remarks, even the theological and philosophical terms Nanak uses from his common Indian and Semitic heritage are "quite different from their dictionary meaning or their significance in various schools." Trilochan Singh is clearly making an appeal for their aesthetic understanding: "The potential dynamic of these terms has not been fully grasped even by Sikh writers on Sikhism."⁴⁷

Guru Nanak's verse welcomes audiences to its liberative potential. Everybody can bring in their personal horizon and take in the lyrics corporeally, in a lingering caress. He dismissed the likes of priests and middlemen. Gadamer's advice for translators comes in handy for Guru Nanak's readers and listeners too: "you must sharpen your ear, you must realize that when you take a word in your mouth, you have not taken up some arbitrary tool which can be thrown in a corner if it doesn't do the job, but you are committed to a line of thought that comes from afar and reaches on beyond you" (*TeM* 547–548). In this interplay of pointedness and openness, tonality and textures of Guru Nanak's compositions caress the skin, are heard in the inner ear, are tasted by the tongue, seen by the eyes, and keenly inhaled. In this immediate, dialogical relationship audiences recover Guru Nanak's unique usage of language, his spiritual aspiration, and his pragmatist philosophy, "When we keep our attention fixed upon an object which attracts us, two things tend to happen: we get absorbed in the object and the objects gets absorbed into us."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Louise Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1994, pp. 24–25.

⁴⁶ John Armstrong, *Move Closer: An Intimate Philosophy of Art*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 2000, p. 98.

⁴⁷ Trilochan Singh, "Guru Nanak's Religion," p. 108. ⁴⁸ Armstrong, *Move Closer*, p. 99.

(1) Aesthetic absorption actualizes the transformative potential of Guru Nanak's poetics. Five and a half centuries later we find the "oneness" prophet Nanak envisioned has not been put into practice. In spite of their belief in the Sikh "doctrine" of oneness of the divine and equality of all creatures – caste, class, gender, sex, and race, discriminations are rife in practice.⁴⁹ Conventional patriarchal values of Punjabi culture are enacted in daily affairs. Women are not allowed to perform Kirtan at the Golden Temple. How ironic that women even today cannot lead in the singing of the very verses that depict *her* as the spiritual paradigm! Satwinder Kaur Bains incisively describes "the visually and aggressively male presence" distancing female bodies from their sacred text at this central Sikh shrine.⁵⁰ Nanakian aesthetics is an embodied experience of the pluriversal transcendent One, and until that One is actually felt by men and women in their individual bodies, social segregations and personal schizophrenia will persist. While broadening the knowledge of Guru Nanak's literary textures, aesthetic approach, I imagine, can affectively and pragmatically decode genetically coded bigotry and androcentrism.

(2) An aesthetic undertaking bridges the gap between the community and the academy. Guru Nanak's compositions are at the center of Sikh life. Private and public worship entails reciting, reading, singing, musically performing, and listening to his hymns. Louise Rosenblatt's comment, "The element of absorption in the moment is present in ritual activity, but the medium that excites this state is in itself expendable" gives me pause.⁵¹ Since the devout hear, read, recite, and perform Guru Nanak's verse with such reverent submission to what they have come to believe is a God-Lord above, do they allow themselves to be caressed by its sensory textures? Then there are the high-hatted scholars who steadfastly maintain their objective distance from any corporeal associations. In each case the same old mind–body binary surfaces. Aesthetic stance gives agency and freedom to the receiver, "ceases to be an act of passive

⁴⁹ Incisively brought out by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, *Behzti (Dishonor)*. Ottawa: Oberon, 2015. See also Opinderjit Kaur Takhar, *Sikh Identity: An Exploration of Groups Among Sikhs*. London: Routledge, 2005; Surinder S. Jodhka, *Caste in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2015; Doris R. Jakobsh's two volumes *Sikhism and Women: History, Texts and Experience* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010 and *Exploring Gender and Sikh Traditions* (Basel: MDPI Religions, 2021) bring together many important concerns authored by Sikh and non-Sikh scholars.

⁵⁰ Satwinder Kaur Bains, "Interrogating Gender in Sikh Tradition." *MDPI Religions*, 11 (1) (2020) p. 34.

⁵¹ Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, p. 30.

consumption of a text and instead becomes a fruitful performance of focusing one's attention on what one reads in order to allow creative meanings to blossom."⁵²

Western notions of the distant God-Lord were reinforced by the colonial machine and infiltrated Sikh exegeses and translations; they have made their way into the Sikh psyche. But received aesthetically, Guru Nanak's works can stir up liberating feelings and attitudes, and generate new ideas and experiences. It is important that his multisensory corpus makes its way beyond sacred spaces and sacramental readings to classrooms, public forums, and poetry readings. The Guru eliminated the sacred–secular division. Academic venues must not be limited to an “efferent” reading that seeks to extract and *carry away* information historical, theological, or factual. An aesthetic reception expands emotional and intellectual space, space where old habits, assumptions, and preconceived categories find themselves out of place. That community members, academics, and the general public alike taste Guru Nanak's empowering sensory excitement and share with one another as a global *sangat* is my overarching wish.

(3) An aesthetic approach is historically significant. Guru Nanak's distinct revelation is the very foundation of the Sikh religion. It was his personal intimacy with the infinite One, and fully conscious of its vitality, he built an infrastructure to provide aesthetic momentum for later generations. To reexperience the Guru's relationship with the infinite One preserved in his verse (*bāṇī*) is the defining feature of the Sikh religion. If we miss out on Guru Nanak's aesthetics, we miss out on the new existentiality he initiated. We fail to comprehend his historical reality, his artistic genius, his revolutionary impulse, and the independent origins of the Sikh religion.⁵³

Scholarly assumptions that he was a “follower of Kabir” or a reformer who “syncretized Hinduism and Islam” are now outdated; nevertheless, Guru Nanak continues to be categorized as a “Sant” and is located within the “Sant Tradition.”⁵⁴ If anything, Guru Nanak's rapturous tone and

⁵² Michael D. Boatright & Mark A. Faust, “How Daring Is the Reading: Emerson's Aesthetic Reading,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 49 (4) (Winter 2015), p. 49.

⁵³ For a detailed critique see N. G. K. Singh, *The First Sikh: Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak*. New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2019, pp. 26–30.

⁵⁴ Neeti Sadarangini (above, n. 9). Also, Oxford University Press, 2003: www.encyclopedia.com/religion/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/sant-tradition.

body-affirming poetics are diametrically opposed to the didactic, pessimistic, and body-deprecating Sants. For sure he did not exist in a vacuum; he belonged to the rich multireligious, cultural, ethnic soil of the Punjab which he organically absorbed and vibrantly emitted in his innovative poetics. His profound knowledge of the sacred texts, sacred spaces, rituals, pilgrimages, and literary genres from multiple religious traditions of medieval north India expressed in his verse familiarizes and enriches his readership with difference and diversity. The immediacy of his verse soundly proves its authenticity and its autonomy from all antecedent establishments. As Chapter 5 confirms, the aesthetic stance testifies that the Sikh religion is grounded in Guru Nanak's *personal* experience, his alone.

(4) Guru Nanak founded a distinct Sikh religion – paradoxically – by tightening the human bond made by the five senses common to all religions, races, social groups, and sexes. Embodied in the One, his trans-religiosity went beyond the categories of “monotheism,” “polytheism,” or “atheism”; “male” or “female.” “There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim” is what he is remembered to have proclaimed. “Religions,” he deemed, were institutionalized by the custodians of the respective traditions into systems for their own control and power; suppressing the individuality of the people, they usurped their essential humanity. Whereas conventional ideological approaches and paradigms tend to beget divisions and male-centered biases, attention to the body promotes mutuality that allows for variety, equality, and particularity in women and men across space and time. Today, intra- and inter-religious divisions with their constructions and conceptions of race, gender, sexuality, class, caste, and nationality are posing a threat to humanity. In this climate of hyperpolarization, the need to revitalize the Panhuman sensorium is more urgent than ever.

Transcendent aesthetics is all about an embodied cognition of our shared unity with families, friends, communities, and nature implanted in that One (*ikk*), and its reflex is real interactions – not virtual or *lethe* +argical. To sum up:

Aesthetics is about the ways embodied social creatures like us experience meaning, and these ways of meaning-making emerge from the nature of our bodies, the way our brains work in those bodies, our social interactions with other people, and the structure of the environments with which we are in continual visceral interactions.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, p. 25.

Human bodies resonate with other human bodies and with the natural landscape as a whole. David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* makes us realize that "We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human."⁵⁶ In the blood of our songster-poet-jeweller flows "The same stream of life that runs through" Indian Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore's veins: "night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures" (*Gitanjali* # 69). The inherent elasticity of Nanakian aesthetics stretches a reader's ligaments to galaxies far away, bonding them with the wide universe in all its diversity and multiplicity.

But how can we? Our modern society is facing an existential threat: we are anesthetized, we lack sensate cognition. We function "corpse-like" (*murdād*) in the Nanakian lexicon (GGS: 469), "etherized" or "under ether" in T. S. Eliot's usage.⁵⁷ Terry Eagleton laments: "Astonishingly, what is in peril on our planet is not only the environment, the victims of disease and political oppression, and those rash enough to resist corporate power, but *experience itself*."⁵⁸ Living in cyberspace communities with smart phones as bodily organs and artificial intelligence to rely upon, we are "distancing ourselves from our bodies. We have been losing our ability to pay attention to what we smell and taste."⁵⁹ Alienated from ourselves we are alienated from our community, we are alienated from our environment, we are alienated from the world at large, warns social philosopher Yuval Noah Harari in his *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*. I argue that aesthetics is the antidote.

(5) The study of Indian religions in both India and the West has emphasized the centrality and even superiority of asceticism as a means of gaining spiritual knowledge. Guru Nanak's *aestheticophilia* challenges conventional intellectual and theoretical mappings. He would have joined Mark Johnson in dismantling the cognitive-importance hierarchy, and making aesthetics the foundation of a "new philosophy of experience" based on John Dewey's gospel.⁶⁰ Johnson's wit and pungency is shared by the first Sikh guru against his own intellect-worshipping, anti-body peers. Guru Nanak's oeuvre is an unmined resource to engage with from multiple disciplines. His distinctive way of conceiving and perceiving through

⁵⁶ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More Than Human World*.

⁵⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*; "When the evening is spread out against the sky Like a patient etherised upon a table . . ." T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.

⁵⁸ Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*. Oxford; Blackwell, 2007, p. 17.

⁵⁹ Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*. New York: Random House, 2019, p. 89.

⁶⁰ Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, p. 241.

the body was a new way of *being with Being* that he set into motion in medieval India. With its bodily basis of meaning, thought, and value, *Guru Nanak's Transcendent Aesthetics* can contribute meaningfully to the recent approaches and methods for studying humanities. Since it departs from traditional methods and approaches to Sikh Studies, this study should open up new possibilities for a holistic and dynamic understanding of the somatic intensity of religious phenomena at large.

I.2 Sequence

Guru Nanak's aesthetics is far too expansive and profoundly intricate for me to attempt a comprehensive study. This volume tries to catch some of its vitality in the ensuing five chapters.

Chapter 1 "Aesthetic Stairway: The *Japuji*," enters Guru Nanak's foundational hymn intricately woven with *philiat* textures. It is not set in any musical mode; the title *japu* (*ji* is an honorific suffix) slips into an imperative, a reflective murmuring. The condensed *Japuji* reveals seven vital aspects of Guru Nanak's transcendent aesthetics. (1) The five senses (*panc*), our critical aesthetic agents who enable us to access the embodied processes of Guru Nanak's poetics. (2) The keynote of Nanakian aesthetics, the prologue to the *Japuji* (*mūlmantra*). (3) The thirty-eight stairsteps of the aesthetic passage opening new vistas at every level. (4) The aesthetic sphere (*saram khand*) where epistemic faculties are honed. (5) Aesthetic disclosures of the singular One: design (*hukam*), writing (*lekhā*), loving look (*nadar*). (6) Aesthetic productions create an ethics of joy: "truth, beauty, enduring joy" (*sati subhāṇu sadā manu cāo*), with their aesthetic activities singing (*gāvīai*), listening (*sunīai*), embracing (*manīai*), and loving (*manu rakhīai bhāo*). (7) Aesthetic epilogue (*śloka*) that captures the paradigmatic scene of everyday life: all beings are playing together in this world cozily nestled on the laps of their caretakers night and day. That transcendence is somatically materialized in daily rhythms is substantiated in this opening composition.

Chapter 2 "Aesthetic Repertoire and Literary Appetizers" samples Guru Nanak's compositions from the *rāga* chapters and the miscellaneous sections of the GGS compiled and meticulously organized by Guru Arjan in 1604. Most of the scriptural text is arranged in thirty-one *rāgas* of Indian classical music, and we find a rich variety of Guru Nanak's compositions spread in nineteen of them. By proceeding sequentially through each *rāga* chapter, we are introduced to some of Guru Nanak's

major compositions such as his two acrostics *Paṭī Likhī* in Rāga Asa and *Dakhaṇī Oankār* in Rāga Ramkali, his Twelve Month *Bārah Māhā* poem in Rāga Tukhari, his ballads in rāgas Majh, Asa, and Malar, his discourse with the Siddhas in Rāga Ramkali, and several of his shorter poems like “Songs of Mourning” (*Alāhṇīān*) in Rāga Vadahans or the “Verses on Emperor Babur” (*Babarvāṇī*) in rāgas Asa and Tilang. Since many of these genres were popular in the romantic and devotional literature of medieval India, we gain access into the broader South Asian literary world. By sampling Guru Nanak’s works in the order that they are framed in the GGS, we are guided through the wide range of his oeuvre, and we also get a real feel for his verse.

Chapter 3 “Aesthetic Designs in the Language of Love” zooms in on Guru Nanak’s poetic innovations in “the language of infinite love – *bhākhīā bhāo apāru*.” What was his linguistic context? What was his understanding of language? How does he use language to create such tactile literary textures? How does he materialize his transcendent subject? His intimations that today evoke the *guru-bāṇī* identity of the GGS? The chapter has seven sections. We will look into how the manifold names for the formless One emerge from Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, and Nath backdrops, and merge into the plenitude of Guru Nanak’s singular One. We will analyze the feminine syntax of his poetry; how morally, intellectually, and spiritually refined women exist as palpable models for the human–divine nexus. We will attend his all-inclusive sensuous modes of worship. In effect we will explore how our songster-poet-jeweller aesthetically designs images, symbols, paradoxes, allusions from his multilingual and multireligious context to metamorphose the ordinary into the extraordinary, the foreign into the familiar, poetry into body.

Chapter 4 “Aesthetic Agents: The Sensuous Quintet” is a study of the five bodily senses integral to Guru Nanak’s metaphysical thought and to his existential praxis. Materially made up of transcendent fibers, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, seeing have the cognitive capacity to take us off to limitless territories, or inversely, get us tangled up in messy affairs. They belong to everybody irrespective of race, gender, sexuality, class, politics, or religion, and though they are different modalities, they are a part of the same unitary living body and work together – intersensorially, synaesthetically. For Guru Nanak there is no stereotypical hierarchy between “lower” and “higher” senses, that is, between “sensations” and “perceptions”; the five are equally saturated with ontological, ethical, psychological, and soteriological import, and flourish in concert. However, in order to understand the critical role and function of these somatic agents,

we will take them up separately. Hopefully the positive, progressive Nanakian outlook can cure some of the chronic *somatophobic* abnormalities prevailing across cultures.

Chapter 5 “Aesthetic Revealer: Poet-Songster-Jeweller” returns to the primal Sikh moment, the divine revelation of Guru Nanak. Autobiographically recounted in Majh Ballad, his sensuous encounter with the formless One is corroborated in early Sikh sources like the *Janamsākhis*. This chapter is a three-mirrored kaleidoscope: (1) how the songster/bard (*dhāḍī*) Nanak relays his revelatory event in sonic aesthetics, (2) how poet (*shāir*) Nanak shares his numinous encounter in poetic ingenuity, and (3) how jeweller/goldsmith (*sunīāru*) Nanak artistically stages his foundational experience for his audiences to reexperience it. Art as idealized by Martin Heidegger, Amrita Sher-Gil, Leo Tolstoy, Rabindranath Tagore, is fulfilled by Guru Nanak’s *gesamtkunstwerk*. His multiple art forms function as Art to show how the transcendent One is aesthetically lived in this world, connected with one another. With his voice recorded in the GGS as our rich resource, we retrieve Guru Nanak’s own perception of his aesthetic vocation.

The “Conclusion: Aesthetic Praxis” comprises the fivefold reception of Guru Nanak’s aesthetics: the praxis of Sangat (being together), Kirtan (divine praise), Langar (community meal), Seva (selfless service), and Vak (numinous message). Launched by Guru Nanak, his nine successors played an important role in developing these practices as central Sikh institutions. Quintessentially democratic, emancipatory, and empathy-generating practices, they uphold the ethical aspirations of contemporary philosophers promoting “everyday aesthetics.” These popular practices are not exclusive to the Sikh community; they are aesthetic modalities that train people to live pluralistically in a diverse global world. Guru Nanak’s Sangat (being together) bears a striking affinity with Martin Luther King’s “Beloved Community” and Desmond Tutu’s “*Ubuntu*” (inter-relationality) since their substratum likewise is togetherness, justice, and enhancement of humanity. The praxis of Kirtan (song and music of divine praise) is a vehicle, a verb, an activity that embraces diverse audiences. Langar (eating together free of purity/pollution and caste taboos) is not only nutritious, but it also compels us to confront food apartheid. How can billions of our siblings be denied access to basic food, health, and sanitation standards? Seva (selfless work) dissolves selfish ego and opens up the spirit to guard mother earth, and defend civil and human rights for people across castes, religions, genders, and sexualities. Vak (opening of the GGS at random and reading the first composition on its left-hand page as a personal communication with the infinite One) is a diurnal aesthetic intersection

of the timeless with time; aesthetically received, it is aesthetically applied in making everyday choices, shaping attitudes, thoughts, and actions. Organically reproduced in Guru Nanak's transcendent aesthetics, Sangat, Kirtan, Langar, Seva, and Vak are exercises to strengthen *philial* muscles and intensify our sense of possible reality.

I.3 Prelude

This introduction so far has outlined the essential features and significance of my topic, and the framework for my volume. But it would be remiss without a live performance. Therefore, we now attend a Nanakian concert to which all are invited. There are no special seats reserved for anybody.

Guru Nanak's composition in four-stanzas (*caupade*) located in Asa Rāga stages a visual and aural performance. Its simple language belies its subtle artistry as it kinesthetically produces a metaphysical dance. The dynamic rhythm of the brisk "versets"⁶¹ with their euphonic sounds and interchanging shapes strikes the skin. The *rahāo* (pause) verse, a common feature of Guru Nanak's compositions, carries the central theme, and it usually follows the first stanza, beckoning readers, singers, and listeners to halt and reflect. In this instance it directs audiences to focus on the present performance, for all others (*hor*) are mere amusements. Forecasting something special, the curtain is raised:

- (1) *vājā mati pakhāvaju bhāo*
hoe anandu sadā manī cāo
ehā bhagati eho tap tāo
itu rangī nācahu rakhi rakhi pāo
- pūre tāl jāṇai sālāh*
horu nacanā khusiā man māh (rahāo)
- (2) *satū santokhu vajahi dui tāl*
pairī vājā sadā nihāl
rāgu nādu nahi dūjā bhāo
itu rangī nācahu rakhi rakhi pāo
- (3) *bhao pherī hovai man cīti*
bahidiā uṭhadiā nītā nīti
leṭaṇi leṭi jāṇai tanu suāhu
itu rangī nācahu rakhi rakhi pāo

⁶¹ The term "versets" introduced by Robert Alter (in *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. London: W. W. Norton, 2018) is perfect for Guru Nanak's half verses.

sikh sabhā dikhīā kā bhāo
gurmukh suṇāṇā sākā nāo
nanak ākhaṇu verā ver
itu rangū nācahu rakhi rakhi pair (4)

Wisdom our wind instrument; love, our percussion
 Our mind rejoices in bliss forever.
 This is our devotion, austerity, penance,
 Let's dance in colors, our feet on the beat. (1)

Know divine praise has the perfect beat
*Every other dance amuses the mind.*⁶²

Our cymbals are truth and contentment,
 Feet tap in enduring bliss.
 In love with the mystic melody alone,
 Let's dance in colors, our feet on the beat. (2)

Our mind and thought whirl in awe
 Always whether we sit or stand,
 Or spin on the floor, we know our body is ashes.
 Let's dance in colors, our feet on the beat. (3)

In the concert of seekers, lovers of learning,⁶³
 Face the guru to hear the true Name.
 Nanak says this over and over,
 Let's dance in colors, our feet on the beat. (4)

GGs: 350

We witness a spectacular performance. Bodily gestures and sonorous instruments perform a skillful choreography of physiological, psychological, intellectual, moral, and spiritual movements right before our eyes. Nanakian poetry chimes with Johnson's theory:

The gestures of the dancing and singing body present the qualities, feelings, affect, contours, emotions, images, and image schemas that are the flesh, bone, and blood of embodied meaning.⁶⁴

Simultaneously, synchronically, Guru Nanak's lyrical and rhythmic movements join the cosmic dance performance in Tagore's veins, the mystical dance performance of Samā' in Sufi practice, "the dance along the artery/ the circulation of the lymph" "figured in the drift of stars" in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

⁶² Since it is indicated as the *rahāo* (pause) verse, I have italicized it. I have followed the pattern of italicizing the *rahāo* verses throughout this volume.

⁶³ "Seekers" in the original "*sikh*". ⁶⁴ Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, p. 220.

The robust body in its natural plenitude is Guru Nanak's dancer who rocks, thumps, swings, and spins around. For sure it does not turn away from the world but is very much here; with its feet embedded in the soil of the earth, it is engaged in various actions. On Guru Nanak's stage – the feet denigrated by the upper castes for birthing the bottom caste (Rig Veda X: 90), the feet denigrated by mind-exalting elites for polluting sacred entities even without a touch⁶⁵ – hold terrestrial weight as they tap in enduring bliss (*sadā nihāl*) in tune with the cosmic beat. The whole body vigorously dances to the music created by wisdom, love, truth, and contentment. Its anatomical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual cultivation are concurrent phenomena. A keen awareness of temporality – the well-trained body is eventually ashes (*tanu suāhu*) – animates each movement and each gesture in each evanescent instant so each step is aligned with the timeless pulse. Primal energy surges in its veins from the toes to the head and joyously hands and feet reach out to forge social and cosmic relationships in the sequence of day and night. The hands playing music are actions done wisely, for the percussion instrument is struck by love, and the cymbals of truth and contentment are in harmony with the universal mystic melody. Replacing penance and other devotional and ascetic practices, Guru Nanak's performance is an existential knowledge (*jānai*) – in consonance with the “perfect beat” (*pūre tāl*) of praise (*sālāh*) of that all-inclusive One. Synchronized music and dance cultivate communal spirit, individuals chime in with the collective body and echo one another on this panoramic cosmic stage.

Just as in this dance performance music is embodied in physical postures, gestures, and movement, so Guru Nanak's word is embodied in form, the ideas in the stylistic rhythm, the signified in the signifiers, the transcendent in the material, the religious in his art. With sonorous music combining bodily movements double joy grips the heart, and the timeless melody magically begins to beat within. The performance *is* the experience. Guru Nanak's aesthetic stance entertains such that audiences can entertain multivalent meanings, they can entertain all sorts of religious, cultural, and linguistic differences. The poetic analogies are not contrived, they are naturally animate. Energy spirals from within and takes on sonorous alliteration, consonance, assonance, and rhyming patterns.

⁶⁵ In a popular *Janamsākhi*, Nanak is reprimanded for falling asleep with his feet turned toward the mosque in Mecca. The narrative plot not only unfolds the omnipresence of the divine but also Guru Nanak's affirmation of the human body from head to toe. For a fuller discussion see my *Janamsākhi: Paintings of Guru Nanak in Early Sikh Art*, narrative #12, New Delhi: Roli, 2023, pp. 63–65.

Musicality is inherent in his language. The repetition of the final verse in the four stanzas, *iti rangi nācahu rakhi rakhi pāo* amplifies the melodic effect of the entire composition so it continues to resonate long after our formal attendance.⁶⁶ The first half of the verse, *itu rangi nācau* – *let's dance in colors*, has an airy radiant atmosphere; the second, *rakhi rakhi pāo* – *our feet on the beat*, calls for an earthy grounding of practical tenacity. Such quick Nanakian juxtapositions generate multiple moods and diverse reverberations. His poetics defies all rules of traditional Indian prosody.

The word *sikh* prominently appears in the fourth stanza. I believe this concert is what Guru Nanak imagined for his community he gave birth to, and his own words also relay its import: “Nanak says this over and over.” Sparkling jewels and rubies and pearls illuminate the space where Sikhs, the lovers of learning, gather.⁶⁷ Their music and dance are a poised balance of their physical and spiritual self, and consequently, every step of the way they perform actions for the good of fellow beings by utilizing their human faculties ever in tune with the infinite beat. This concert hall is no removed space nor is its aesthetics spectator-oriented; it is the home, school, workplace, shopping mall, community center, and every other local place, a working out with the sensuous feel of the infinite One.

And so this introduction ushers us into Guru Nanak's transcendent virtuoso performance.

⁶⁶ To maintain the rhyme, the fourth changes *pao* to *pair*.

⁶⁷ Also N. G. K. Singh, *The First Sikh*, pp, 62–64.