1
Introduction

I

> There is a story, of a Pathan who was seen holding a paint brush in his hand. A poet remarked, 'O Pathan, a sword in the hand suits you better, not a paint brush.' To this, the Pathan replied, 'You shall see. My paint brush will bring alive history—when you see my paintings, feel them, your hands shall pick up a sword on their own.'[1]

Gurdwara Sisganj in Delhi is one of the holiest Sikh shrines in India. It stands prominently on Chandni Chowk, the main street in the former Mughal capital of Shahjahanabad (now popularly referred to as *purani Dilli*, or old Delhi). The site of Sisganj is immensely significant for its association with the martyrdom of the ninth Sikh Guru, Tegh Bahadur (1621–75), and also for its location, very close to the Red Fort, the seat of the Mughals. Sikh tradition[2] informs us that Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (1618–1707) was forcing a group of Kashmiri brahmins to convert to Islam, and they approached Guru Tegh Bahadur for help. The Guru declared that if Aurangzeb could convert him, everyone else would convert; if not, the emperor must leave them alone. The Guru, along with three of his disciples, Bhai Mati Das, Bhai Sati Das and Bhai Dyala, was imprisoned at the Mughal *kotwali* (prison) in Chandni Chowk. The three Sikhs were tortured in the Guru's presence to scare him into converting to Islam. It is said that Bhai Mati Das was sawn in half, Bhai Sati Das was wrapped in cotton and burnt and Bhai Dyala was boiled alive. Even after witnessing the torture and death of his followers, the Guru refused to convert. As a result, he was beheaded. In Sikh tradition, Guru Tegh Bahadur's sacrifice is considered unique in history, an example of a person's sacrifice to

defend someone else's faith (a reference to the Hindus), and the Guru is thus popularly called *Hind di chadar*, or the protector of India.

Gurdwara Sisganj stands at the site of the Guru's sacrifice. Situated within visible distance from the Red Fort, the gurdwara and its associated buildings are as if standing in defiance, a commemoration of their own history and sacrifice. The Mughal prison is now the *langar khana* (community kitchen). Facing the gurdwara is a blue-and-white fountain built by the British, which is believed to stand on the site where the three followers of the Guru gave up their lives. Locally called the *fawwara*, the fountain serves as a roundabout and is now a shrine to the three martyrs, renamed Bhai Mati Das Chowk. Adjacent to the fountain is a buff-coloured building, which has a charitable dispensary and a rest house for travellers. It also houses the Bhai Mati Das Museum, a Sikh *ajaibghar* (Figure 1.1).[3]

One enters the museum with the head covered and without shoes, as one would in the sacred space of a gurdwara. The entrance to the museum on the busy *fawwara* does not quite prepare the visitor for the space inside.

Figure 1.1 Bhai Mati Das Museum at Chandni Chowk, 2024. The fountain-shrine is in the centre and the museum is on the right-hand side (the façade with rooftop canopies). The photograph is taken from near the Gurdwara Sisganj, which faces this view.

Source: Author.

There are large halls on two storeys, which constitute the museum. The display is unusual. In a museum, one typically expects a collection of old, rare objects of historical value. Here, the halls are lined with modern paintings. There are portraits of the Sikh Gurus, stories from their lives and that of their followers—'history paintings', which narrate the story of the Sikh past. These are oil paintings on canvas made in the Western academic or realist style. The painted scenes and their descriptions are like a storybook unfolding (Figure 1.2). Walking through the gallery of paintings, I found myself drawn into their world. There was the young Guru Nanak asleep in the sun, being provided shade by a cobra; Nanak and his companion Mardana on their travels; Mata Khivi, famous for her generosity, preparing the *langar*; Guru Gobind Singh accepting baptism from the Panj Piare;[4] Baba Deep Singh charging into the battlefield; and Mai Bhago inspiring her companions to fight. The characters are so vividly depicted in the paintings that even as a non-Sikh viewer, I could feel both the gentleness of the Gurus' expression and the energy of the Khalsa;[5] the sacrifice of the martyrs was deeply moving, and the fearlessness of these Sikhs was awe inspiring.

Like many of us, I was already familiar with these images. I had seen them on wall and pocket calendars distributed by our local shopkeepers, in small,

Figure 1.2 History paintings at Bhai Mati Das Museum, Delhi, 2012.

Source: Courtesy of DSGMC. Photo by author.

private shrines in shops and homes, in advertisements celebrating anniversaries of the Gurus and Sikh heroes; and in popular magazines. Animation films and songs available on the internet and television programmes on Sikh history are full of these images. These pictures had seemed to me as simply popular bazaar art; I was now encountering them within a museum. Where did these paintings come from? Who made them and why? How did they end up in a museum? What is it about these paintings that engages the viewer? And what is the story they tell? This book is a pursuit of these questions.

Bhai Mati Das Museum opened to the public in 2001 and is run by the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC), a rich and influential body which manages the historic gurdwaras in Delhi. The museum is named after one of the three disciples of Guru Tegh Bahadur who is believed to have been martyred in Chandni Chowk in 1675. An introductory panel in Gurmukhi at the entrance of the museum informs the visitor of the purpose of the museum and its significance: that the museum stands on a site enriched with the blood of martyrs (*shaheedan de khoon naal rangi dharti*)—of Guru Tegh Bahadur, his three followers and Banda Bahadur and his 740 companions (who are said to have died here in the early eighteenth century). And that

> the museum has been established to preserve this history and to keep alive its memory.… The paintings have been created and displayed with the purpose of making people from India and abroad see and experience the glorious Sikh heritage, the sacrifices and the achievements. We firmly believe that this museum dedicated to the martyrs will help the country's young generations become Sikhs and Singhs, adorning the Khalsa (*maryada-badh Sikh, Singh te Khalsa sajaan vich sahayak hovega*).[6]

The museum has a total of 169 paintings on display, out of which 166 are oil paintings and three are printed posters. These are modern paintings depicting scenes from Sikh history in a realistic manner, hence my use of the term 'history paintings'.[7] In the museum, they are organised chronologically and illustrate the story of the ten Sikh Gurus, from Nanak (the first Guru) to Gobind (the last one) and the most important people and episodes from Sikh history. The display includes the Gurus' portraits, scenes from their lives, their teachings and interactions with followers. There are scenes of Sikhs embracing martyrdom; portraits of the commanders of military bands (*misl*)

who rose to prominence in the eighteenth century, followed by the emergence of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's empire in Punjab in the early nineteenth century; *bhagat*s (saint-poets, like Baba Farid and Kabir)[8] whose compositions are part of the holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*; events showing Sikh resistance to the British colonial rule (late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries); and the Sikhs' role in the army of independent India (post-1947). There are a couple of glass cases near the entrance with a few items, including a replica of a wooden *rabab* (stringed musical instrument) and a miniature model of the Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple), Amritsar. A simple welcome desk and a small shelf with popular tracts on Sikh religion and history complete the set-up of the museum. The history paintings in the museum have a particularly interesting trajectory. These were not made for display in a museum but were originally commissioned by the Punjab & Sind Bank (PSB), a prominent banking institution in India, over a period of three decades for their annual calendars. The bank published calendars on Sikh history, illustrating them with history paintings especially commissioned for this purpose. Tracing the journey of these paintings from the calendars to the museum reveals the underlying threads of interconnected processes: the world of popular Sikh art, the networks of patronage behind the paintings and Sikh museums, the creation of Sikh heritage through these and its relationship with Sikh identity and politics. The following chapters will examine these themes and the interconnections between them and demonstrate how they come together in Sikh museums.

II

A number of Sikh museums have been established in independent India—museums which narrate stories from the lives of the Sikh Gurus, their teachings, episodes involving their most dedicated followers, and significant events in the history of the Sikh community. Some of these exist in association with gurdwaras, others stand independently and may vary in size from being small one-roomed spaces to prominent buildings functioning exclusively as museums. They are noteworthy for several reasons. A significant number of these museums exist, mainly in the north Indian states of Punjab and Delhi. The display is unusual, for it is largely based on modern history paintings rather than on artefacts of historical value. In spite of the appellation 'museum', there is hardly any drive to collect, classify or preserve historical remains in Sikh museums. Sikh museums rarely have a curator; it is common for artists

to be associated with specific museums, creating paintings for the display. The paintings are not unique, rare or antique in the sense of conventional museum objects, nor are they relic items associated with the Gurus. In fact, the display is widely available for use, reuse and consumption in popular culture. The museums demonstrate a perceptible overlap of the secular and the sacred, which is evident in the display (of the most honoured people of a religion) and in the visitors' behaviour (reverential towards the museum space and the paintings), the location of the museums (often part of a sacred landscape) and their sponsorship by both religious and secular authorities. The form and content of the display are nearly identical in all Sikh museums, yet more and more Sikh museums continue to be created. These elements set the Sikh museums apart from a typical museum, in both the Western and South Asian contexts, defying an easy characterisation.

The field of museum and heritage studies, though well established globally, has very little scholarship on India or South Asia. Existing theories on museums and heritage have focused on Western societies where musealisation has been variously considered as part of the heritage and tourism industry, the exhibitionary complex, as institutions of modern nation states, as nostalgia in the face of loss of tradition and as part of visual media spectacles (for instance, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Bennett 1995; Duncan 1995). The interaction between religion and museums has mostly been studied in the context of the history, presence and treatment of religious objects in Western museums. The focus is on museumisation of sacred objects and on questions of appropriateness while displaying or collecting them (Paine 2013; Sullivan 2015; Buggeln, Paine and Plate 2017; Davis 1997).

Critical studies on the history, nature and politics of museums in South Asia have been published only recently. These studies can be broadly divided into two: The first focusing on museums which were first planned and built during colonial rule and their trajectory in independent nation states, such as the Lahore Museum in Pakistan, the Indian Museum in Kolkata and the National Museum in New Delhi (Guha-Thakurta 2004; Kavita Singh 2002; Ray 2008; Bhatti 2012; Roychowdhury 2015). These works examine colonial museums in close relation to the history of archaeology and art history in India and have especially noted the museums' role in the development of a specific idea of their respective nation's history, located in its material evidence such as sculptures. The use of the museum as an institution shaping 'national' heritage (and being shaped by it), in a newly independent India and Pakistan, is explored in these writings. Colonial looting and collecting of Tibetan

culture and its transnational museological expressions, including in India, are examined in Harris (2012). The second strand of scholarship focuses on a new kind of museum which has recently emerged in India, built by non-state actors. These museums are often notable for their spectacular architecture and multimedia display, for example, the Akshardham Cultural Complex, New Delhi, and the Virasat-e Khalsa in Anandpur Sahib (Brosius 2011; Mathur and Singh [2015] 2017b). These works have highlighted how the boundaries between shrines and museums are indistinguishable in these institutions, and how religious practices specific to a particular group are presented as heritage for larger communities.

Within this field, very little is known about Sikh museums, their emergence and the role they play in contemporary India. The existing scholarship on Sikh museums focuses on two prominent sites—the Kendri Sikh Ajaibghar (Central Sikh Museum) in Amritsar and the Virasat-e Khalsa (Khalsa Heritage Complex) in Anandpur Sahib, both in Punjab. The Central Sikh Museum was the first Sikh museum built in India and is located in the Darbar Sahib complex, a site of tremendous religious and political significance.[9] This museum is, therefore, frequently at the centre of Sikh heritage and political claims, for example, in relation to the commemoration of the events of 1984, as examined by Chopra (2010, 2013, 2018). Virasat-e Khalsa is a recently built mega-museum complex, notable for its spectacular architecture designed by Moshe Safdie, whose Yad Vashem, the holocaust museum in Jerusalem, is believed to have served as an inspiration for making a similar museum for the Sikhs. The relevance of the Virasat-e Khalsa in terms of resources required for the project as well as the definition of Sikh identity in the museum has been questioned (Launois (Sat Kaur) 2003). Mathur and Singh ([2015] 2017b) and Glover (2014) consider this museum within the larger context of monumental architecture and shrines recently built in India and view it as a site of post-national claims by a minority community in a Hindu-dominated state. Kavita Singh (2015) sees it as representative of the emergence of the holocaust museum paradigm in India, with an emphasis on the trauma suffered by the Sikh community through its history. Both these museums are recognised as important sites of Sikh memory and identity in contemporary India in the aforementioned works.

This book looks at a less prominent Sikh museum, located in Delhi. Bhai Mati Das Museum is neither a hotbed of representational politics in the same way the Central Sikh Museum is, nor is it distinctive for its architectural features or as a multimedia spectacle. At first glance, this museum is clearly a

typical Sikh museum, like many others in India, displaying history paintings. Yet it is an ideal case study—the location of the museum (in Delhi, close to Gurdwara Sisganj and the Red Fort), its commemorative intent (remembering the sacrifices of the Sikh martyrs) and the fact that the paintings were initially commissioned for and by a bank provide an entry point for exploring the broader landscape of Sikh museums and heritage in India.

My interest in Sikh museums comes from working for the Virasat-e Khalsa. In 2008, I was employed as a researcher in the design company which was creating the display for this museum. At the time, my responsibilities were to collect material—visual, audio, textual—anything which could be used by the designers to create the display. This provided me an opportunity to observe how history is deployed in the popular sphere, outside of a classroom and a strictly academic realm, and allowed me an insider's view on how this museum came into being. There were massive amounts of research material to collect and examine: monuments, paintings, oral traditions, manuscripts, photographs, colonial records and, not the least, interacting with people who would tell me more about Punjab and the Sikhs. As a student of history, I had read about the politics of representation, and here it was fascinating to see the process unfold and to also participate in it. The concerns of the government and those of the believers, the necessity of being true to the historical evidence and the need for an attractive and communicative design—all came together in creating the *virasat* (heritage) of the Khalsa. This impressive museum would have been a natural choice as a case study to research museums and their role in the creation of heritage. However, a visit to Gurdwara Sisganj and a generous Sikh gentleman's advice to see the paintings in the adjacent building nudged me in a new direction, that of Bhai Mati Das Museum.

III

This study uses a mixed methodology, including a visual analysis of the paintings, a critical examination of the museum's narrative, material from personal and institutional archives, and interviews of the artists and patrons who make and commission the paintings and the museums.

The second chapter, 'Punjab & Sind Bank and the Creation of Sikh Heritage', traces the pre-history of the Bhai Mati Das Museum, with a particular focus on the process of the creation of paintings now housed in it. A major part of the museum's collection originated from the PSB, when the latter commissioned paintings on Sikh history for its illustrated calendars.

This chapter begins with the history of the PSB, its establishment in 1908 by the leading members of the Singh Sabha reform movement (Bhai Vir Singh, Sardar Trilochan Singh and Sardar Sundar Singh Majithia), and demonstrates how this context has subsequently shaped the bank's relationship with Sikh history and its self-perception as a 'Sikh bank'. The initiative to publish calendars on Sikh history started in 1974 and continues even now. It is an activity that both the bank and the Sikh community consider a part of their heritage. The chapter further examines the process of the creation of Sikh history paintings: who conceptualised the calendar and how were its themes chosen; who were the artists recreating Sikh history on canvas and what considerations came into play while 'painting' history; what influenced their work and what were the artists' interactions with the bank? In other words, how was Sikh heritage created?

My primary focus here is to highlight the works of individuals whose values and work shaped this project: the members of the PSB, such as its former chairman Inderjit Singh, the artists who made the history paintings and the members of the Sikh community who contributed as scholars, as members of gurdwara managements or simply as volunteers. I have relied upon interviews with former employees of the bank who were involved in producing the calendar (Makhan Singh), the artists (Devender Singh, Mehar Singh, Mohinder Bodhraj, Rahi Mohinder Singh and Jarnail Singh) and the members of gurdwara committees and other institutions (Kulmohan Singh, Harbans Singh Chawla, Tarlochan Singh) who were involved in creating Sikh museums. The book also uses material obtained from their personal archives of photos, calendars and documents. Based on this research, I have also compiled a list of calendars issued by the PSB, which appears in Appendix 1. It provides the year, theme and description of the paintings as published in the calendars.

A discussion of the PSB's work is relevant for knowing not only the history of the Bhai Mati Das Museum but also the larger landscape of heritage production among the Sikhs and the interlinkages between different institutions united by a common desire to promote Sikh history. The bank's own trajectory—from a private institution which emerged in a colonial context, surviving and growing in India after the Partition, to its nationalisation in 1980, while representing Sikh interests—is an excellent vantage point to understand the way the Sikhs see themselves in relation to the Indian nation and its history.

The next two chapters offer a critical discussion of Sikh heritage as presented in the Bhai Mati Das Museum. The main questions examined are as

follows: Which aspects of Sikh heritage are remembered and why, whom does it benefit and how? What gets left out or appears only in the margins? Has the story told in Sikh museums been challenged? If yes, by whom and how? And how are specific versions of the Sikh past used to make contemporary claims?

The third chapter, 'Sikh Heritage in the Bhai Mati Das Museum', begins with an overview of the display at the Bhai Mati Das Museum, followed by an analysis of its visual elements and the narrative. The key question addressed here is: What is the story of the Sikh past as told by the museum? The museum offers a personality-centric retelling of history, highlighting the way in which the Sikhs epitomise the highest values like equality, justice, kindness and courage. While the museum appears to cover a large timespan of Sikh history, the focus overwhelmingly is on the time of the Gurus and up until Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule in the early–mid nineteenth century. This story is vividly depicted in the paintings, conveying the uniqueness of Sikhism, the sacrifices made by the community in its quest for freedom and justice and its great achievements. Appendix 2 provides a list of paintings with titles and descriptions (in English) as they appear in the museum, and the name of the artist and the year of creation of the painting as it appears on each canvas. Each painting was also photographed. This documentation, done by me, was the primary material for the visual and narrative analysis of the museum display. To understand the development of these paintings historically, I surveyed popular art from the late nineteenth century until the present, available in personal and public collections. A historical survey of this nature was the key to understanding the visual representations of Sikh heritage today. This book does not include the complete survey of popular art; only the relevant arguments appear in this chapter.[10]

The chapter also considers the manner in which this story of the Sikh past is brought alive for the viewer. Why does Bhai Mati Das Museum (and indeed, other Sikh museums) overwhelmingly use modern history paintings? What is their value for conveying Sikh history? What is the significance of its use of realism over traditional artistic styles prevalent in the region? I argue that the Sikh history paintings available in the museum are a relatively modern phenomenon, both in its choice of themes depicted and the use of specific visual elements (such as colour and religious identity markers). This is demonstrated in the chapter by undertaking a visual analysis of history paintings in the museum in the context of the painting traditions and popular art that have existed in the region of Punjab. Through such an analysis, it becomes evident that the modern history paintings in Sikh museums actually