

## **UMRAO SINGH SHER-GIL: HIS MISERY AND HIS MANUSCRIPT**

**Edited by Vivan Sundaram and Devika Daulet Singh**

Published by Photoink

Pages: 254 Price: Rs. 2,750

***A Review by Bandeep Singh***

The innocuous family snapshots are like fragments of a personal memory. Viewed from the distance of a few generations, they form a mosaic that reflects a larger picture - of narratives of personal histories and social subtexts. The lavishly produced book of Umrao Singh Sher-Gil's photographs from 1889 to 1949, edited by artist Vivan Sundaram (Umrao Singh's maternal grandson) and Devika Daulet Singh, heralds an interesting phase in the course of Indian photography where the intimate territory of the family album is being plumbed to unearth social mirrors. The last couple of years have seen a growing interest in photographic archives - both in the public as well as personal spaces. In 2007, Granta published the pictures of photographer Dayanita Singh's mother Nony Singh. This year, curator Radhika Singh put up a show of her father Swaranjit Singh's photographs.

Umrao Singh, Amrita Sher-Gil's father, belonged to Punjab's wealthy land-owning class. He was a scholar, aesthete and one of the earliest Indian practitioners of photography. The book comprises elaborate and often quirky self portraits and pictures of his (second) Hungarian wife and two daughters - Indira and Amrita. His photographs offer a calm counterpoint to the largely orientalist and ethnographic vision of the early British photographers in India and the grandiose studio portraits of Indian royals. His personal portraits and pictures of his family are like a yogi's gentle meditations in the hermitage of his household.

Umrao Singh often posed as his own subject. The earlier cameras and glass plate negatives required "enormous" exposure time of a few seconds. To fill that, he "performs" for the camera making tableaux of his aspirations - as a "Tolstoy-like" medieval scholar, a dandy prince or a long-haired ascetic. It is ironic that while he belonged to the bourgeois class and his pictures often bear the stamp of Victorian paintings and show influences of aristocratic mannerisms, yet they reveal an ease with his native and Sikh cultural identity. He is equally comfortable posing with his bare body and non-turbaned self as much in formal outfits and tunics.

His family pictures also offer a rare and revealing insight into the life of Amrita - one of India's first modern artists - his elder daughter and favourite subject. The pictures reveal her early European influences, liberal upbringing and later quest for an identity in Indian cultural space. Her last pictures shows a gentle shift from the formal rigidity of the posed photograph (with the advent of faster times replacing slow photographic processes) to poignant candid expressions - the eyes sheathing the tempests within. The book makes a well argued case to place the photographer Umrao Singh in the pantheon of Indian photographic history.



## **THE DIVINE MESSAGE OF GURU GRANTH SAHIB**

**By Dr. Devinder Singh Sekhon, Ph.D. Canada**

Published by Arman Publication, #12505-105 Street Grande Prairie Alberta, Canada

Pages 276 Price: Rs. 250/-

***A Review by Dr. Shamsher Singh***

The book is a collection of eighteen research titles relating to different aspects of

Sikhism. It covers the religious, social, philosophic and economic fields of Sikh human life.

The contents are unique in many ways, with numerous practical sayings of Gurus for day-to-day life. It also covers deeply spiritual insights of enlightened souls of Gurus and Saints. The writer tries to inspire the devotees and Seekers of Truth, from stand point of mental, emotional and spiritual awareness which is essential for the present day man living in unquenched - material life of technical world with great tension.

The book is a systematic development of thought, which on one side is a source for the seeker of Truth inner peace, on the other, it is the source and means for the knowledge to understand the balance of life - of contentment, compassion and charity.

Sikhism needs at present to establish its identity at global level for this religion is not an off-shoot of Indian traditional religions, nor transformation of contemporary Indian religious traditions. It is a new religion revealed to Guru Nanak and his spiritual successors for emancipation of all mankind.

The writer covers the following five concepts related with religious philosophy which are key concepts in the present religious world:

1. Hukam, (Divine Will)
2. Naam (Mystic experience of God's presence)
3. Maya (spiritual ignorance, illusions)
4. Guru (Divine preceptor)
5. Path of realization (Salvation)

The writer explains various shades of Hukam. Hukam is an Islamic word which stands for Divine will. There are also synonymous words Raza - Will, and Fear are used. Hukam mediates between Creator and creation. This concept of Hukam is also identified with word of God (Shabad). It is a Divine Law which controls the whole creation.

Gurmukh recognises the Hukam and merges in the Lord. (Maru. M.1)

He explains that Naam-Simran is not a ritual. It is a realization of God's presence every where. Out of the four yugas Naam is efficacious in Kalayuga. All ablution, all charity and all goodness consists in this that once is blessed with the beauty of Naam from Lord's court, (SGGS:636)

Regrettably, modern terminology has trivialized the word Guru. However, the concept of *Guru* is unique in Sikhism, described as 'Living Guru'. The need and the role of Guru, Sabad-Guru, etc. are presented in such a way that justifies the uniqueness of Guru in Sikhism. Guru is Divine Light of God.

The mysteries of God and his creation are known only to God or to the Guru. In Sikhism Guru is commissioned by God to reveal His Truth to humanity. God reveals Himself through Guru. Similarly the idea of *Maya*, expressed by the writer involves many shades of maya. Deeds of previous life under maya leads to transmigration. Maya is created by Brahma. The principle of illusion is known as maya; Maya has two powers, one which hides the reality and secondly it conveys wrong information. It is spiritual ignorance, the power which takes us away from Brahma. Under the influence of Maya, Jiva is in misery and functions in ego. Three guns of maya are the result of ego are *tamas*, *Rajas* and *Sattva*.

The religious philosophy of Sikhism is life-affirming, not a renunciation. Guru teaches us to serve mankind without distinction of caste, creed and community. Dr. Sekhon also tackles some controversial issues, like miracles very sensibly and with reasoning from the sayings of Guru Nanak and Kabir. Similarly, Naam is a real miracle of God. "Without the Naam of God I have no other *Karamat*". (Bhai Gurdas). Ceremonies laavan, pilgrimage, Amrit and recitation of Banies, five vices, five Ks which are mostly current issues raised by the modern man and youth. The writer tries to clarify the Sikh way of life through dialogues

which is very modern and effective.

Under the heading 'status of woman' the writer reiterates the importance and equality of woman with man, with quotations from the holy scripture, on different aspects: i.e, mother and woman are shown to raise and justify the status. SGGS roundly condemns the social evils, like *satti* dowry, infanticide, purdah (veiling), etc.

Finally, the book is a great intellectual effort to convey the message of the Guru Granth Sahib to the present day world. This work is dedicated to the ter-centenary celebration of holy Granth's installation as "Sabad Guru".

