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The Living Words of the Living Master: Sants, Sikhs, Sachkhand Nanak Dham and the Academy

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Abstract

This article investigates a new religious movement, Sachkhand Nanak Dham, by comparing it with Sikhism. It argues that Sachkhand Nanak Dham has affinities with both Punjabi popular religiosity and Sikh sectarian movements. Further, it argues that Sachkhand Nanak Dham today is similar to an earlier stage in the development of Sikhism. It provides an account of the life and work of the founder of Sachkhand Nanak Dham, Mahraz Darshan Das Ji, and identifies significant continuities with the life and work of the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, suggesting that these continuities may be explained by reference to the Sant tradition. Finally, the article speculates about the future development of Sachkhand Nanak Dham, specifically whether it can avoid the fate of becoming a 'religion', according to Mahraz Darshan Das Ji, an institutionalised orthodoxy antithetical to revelatory insight, and in so doing considers the possibility of a new lineage of living Masters.

Introduction

Sachkhand Nanak Dham, a new religious movement of Indian origins, has yet to receive detailed scholarly attention. This article arises out of an ongoing research project, the initial stages of which focused mainly on Sachkhand Nanak Dham International (SNDI), its web site and Handsworth centre.¹ Clearly, additional research is required, including observation and interviews, in order to investigate both the profile of the membership and the relationship between the movement and Sikhism. This research might encompass the religious, caste, and ethnic background of members, alongside an engagement with their attitudes and aspirations. It might also examine any developments within the movement tending towards

greater affinity with, or distinction from, Sikhism, itself a complex concept with blurred boundaries, but belied by the simplicity of the label. In particular, further research is necessary to elucidate the issues surrounding the succession following Mahraz Darshan Das Ji's death, with loyalties initially divided between Maharani Pali Darshan Das Ji and Mahraz Tarlochan Darshan Das Ji (and latterly further divided by the emergence of various Baba Jis as rival leaders). Although obvious differences are evident in explanations of the contemporary situation, preliminary investigation suggests that the factions do not differ significantly in their understanding of the status of the founder and the interpretation of his message. Thus, despite the affiliation of Sachkhand Nanak Dham International with Maharani Pali Darshan Das Ji, its publications provide the basis for the analysis, supplemented by sources associated with Mahraz Tarlochan Darshan Das Ji where relevant.

History and Identity of Sachkhand Nanak Dham

Mahraz Darshan Das Ji (1953–1987), the founder of Sachkhand Nanak Dham, explained that Sachkhand meant “the true house”, Nanak “the light of God”, and Dham “‘home’ or ‘nation’”; accordingly, he defined the movement as “a part of the light of God” (SNDI, “Questions and Answers: Sachkhand Nanak Dham”). The history of the movement as set out in official publications (e.g. SNDI, “Man of Peace”; cf. Das Dharam, “Founder”) relates the signs and wonders that marked the birth and childhood of Darshan Lal Vasdev before describing how he received a spiritual revelation and divine commission at the age of only 17. Henceforward known as Darshan Das, he began his ministry in 1971, establishing his first centre at Batala in the Punjab, which was to be succeeded by others at Loni in Uttar Pradesh, India, and at Handsworth in Birmingham, UK. In 1980, on the occasion of a solar eclipse, he founded Das Dharam as the practical counterpart of Sachkhand Nanak Dham which focused on the service of humanity (SNDI, “Man of Peace”). If there is consensus so far, controversy ensues about subsequent events. One version indicates that, while Mahraz Darshan Das Ji was visiting the United Kingdom, he entrusted the mission in India to the care of his spiritual consort, Maharani Pali Darshan Das Ji (1954–), who now leads the movement (SNDI, “Man of Peace”; “Need a Master?”). Another version denies that she was given the responsibility for Indian congregations during Mahraz Darshan Das Ji's virtual exile, pointing to the work of Baba Ji in sustaining the movement in the midst of government

persecution. Accordingly, Maharani Pali Darshan Das Ji's claims to primacy are rejected in favour of those of Mahraz Darshan Das Ji's eldest son, Mahraz Tarlochan Darshan Das Ji (1978–), referring to a public ceremony in which he was declared leader (Das Dharam, “Present Head”; Personal E-mail Communication with Prominent Follower of Mahraz Tarlochan Darshan Das Ji, 9–15 December 2005).ⁱⁱ

A visitor to the Western Headquarters of Sachkhand Nanak Dham International might conclude that it was a Sikh group of some kind. Apart from the Punjabi background, language, and culture of most adherents, the general appearance of many devotees conforms with *kesh-dhari* norms, the uncut hair associated with the *Khalsa Rahit* (code of belief and practice), and the reverence paid to the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, the scripture designated by Guru Gobind Singh as his successor, similarly suggests a Sikh heritage. Nevertheless, in reality, the situation is more complex. Not only is it misleading to equate being Punjabi with being Sikh, but the group's web site makes the point that Mahraz Darshan Das Ji's humanitarian message is a universal one, accessible to all, with enduring popular appeal (SNDI, “Man of Peace”). Further, Das Harminder, the spokesperson at Handsworth, repeatedly stresses that his long hair and beard are merely matters of personal preference and, indeed, the web site describes a distinctive uniform (followers wear white clothes and red tilak marks on their foreheads) and symbology (a flag with prayer beads around a double-edged sword denoting spirituality and activism) (SNDI, “Signs and Symbols”). Moreover, although the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* is revered, one reason for this reverence is that it includes the compositions of saints from different faiths and it is stated unequivocally that equal reverence is due to other scriptures (ibid).

Of course, in one sense, the issue of Sachkhand Nanak Dham's identity—Sikh or otherwise—has no significance. From a spiritual perspective, conventional religious labels are at best completely irrelevant and at worst positively harmful and as such merit little by way of serious scrutiny. Yet, even if this is theoretically valid, there are grounds for considering the relationship between Sachkhand Nanak Dham and Sikhism, since the frequency of references to Sikh material within Sachkhand Nanak Dham attests to a degree of familiarity consistent with a close connection, as does an ambivalence approaching antipathy towards Sachkhand Nanak Dham on the part of orthodox Sikhs.

Indeed, where there is a close connection, there is often a concomitant need for either or both parties to establish clear lines of demarcation that can become contested and conflictual, especially when wider social or political factors come into play. In the case of Sachkhand Nanak Dham and Sikhism, the divisive issue was Khalistan, the demand for an independent Sikh state. Mahraz Darshan Das Ji advocated a peaceful solution, condemning atrocities perpetrated by Sikh militants and government soldiers alike (SNDI, "Peace Convention"). This stance, maintained in the midst of simmering communal tensions, incurred the enmity of many members of the Sikh community, with attacks on Sachkhand Nanak Dham culminating in the assassination of Mahraz Darshan Das Ji at a prayer meeting in Southall (Tatla, *Sikh Diaspora* 152–3).

These events were by no means unique or unprecedented while global Sikhism was riven by internecine violence, as the assassination of Baba Gurbachan Singh Ji (1930–1980), the leader of the Sant Nirankari Mission, demonstrates (Sant Nirankari Mission). Although orthodox Sikhs would regard both Sachkhand Nanak Dham and the Sant Nirankari Mission as dubious because of their syncretistic tendencies and human Gurus, the violent deaths of Mahraz Darshan Das Ji and Baba Gurbachan Singh Ji might best be attributed to a perception that they profited from government patronage (Tatla, "Nurturing" 367; *Sikh Diaspora* 105–6). Yet, arguably, such allegations of official support are baseless, accounts given by both movements pointing instead to oppression by the authorities, and the comparison drawn between the two leaders on these grounds would probably be rejected by their respective followers. Certainly, one response to this comparison from within Sachkhand Nanak Dham was to declare it a calumny against Mahraz Darshan Das Ji, perpetrated by Khalistani Sikhs, and to suggest that the better comparison for the death of Mahraz Darshan Das Ji would be with the martyrdoms of the fifth and ninth Sikh Gurus, Arjan and Tegh Bahadur (Personal E-mail Communication with Prominent Follower of Mahraz Tarlochan Darshan Das Ji, 9–15 December 2005). Here, too, is an indication of Sachkhand Nanak Dham's links with Sikhism. Before investigating any common elements, however, it is necessary to examine the concept of Sikhism in order to contextualise Sachkhand Nanak Dham.

Sachkhand Nanak Dham and Sikhism

Operinderjit Kaur Takhar's recent study proposes a federal model of the Sikh community, with a shared focus on the *gurmukh* lifestyle of faithfulness to God that can accommodate a variety of beliefs and practices by not imposing a single normative definition which privileges the Khalsa (Takhar 188–90). However, the modern era has seen a considerable stress upon just such a single normative definition, arguably culminating in the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (1950), the authoritative statement of orthodox norms and values, which upholds Khalsa membership as the mark of the committed Sikh. The process by which Khalsa membership was promoted over and against other forms of Sikh observance can be traced to the imperial milieu.

As Harjot Oberoi (423) observes, “the colonial state and its institutions played a significant role in the emergence of a homogeneous Sikh religion”, albeit in combination with other factors. These were Sikh *élite* efforts to respond to the colonial milieu and the reformist activities of their Hindu and Muslim counterparts, as well as the separatist tendencies of the Khalsa ideal, that in this era led to the renunciation by the Tat Khalsa (True Khalsa) of the religious variety countenanced by Sanatan Sikhs (Traditional Sikhs) (ibid 422–4). The nineteenth-century Sikh scene was extraordinarily diverse, both in terms of sectarian movements and popular religiosity; not only did many Sikhs fail to abide by the dictates of the Khalsa discipline, for example, by cutting their hair or smoking tobacco, but they also failed to accept the divisions between different religions, for instance, when making pilgrimage or celebrating festivals (ibid 420). The conservative Sanatan Sikhs, whatever their other concerns, adopted an inclusive attitude that tolerated such diversity, but, in contrast, the radical Tat Khalsa insisted upon the authenticity of only one version of the faith, unified and uniform, that associated with the Khalsa (ibid 420–1). The growing dominance of Tat Khalsa meant that the Khalsa became the basis of a new Sikh identity, forming at the beginning of the twentieth century, that relegated other ways of being Sikh to a secondary status and required an exclusivity of affiliation eschewing all but narrowly defined Sikh sources of authority and places of worship (ibid 421). Hence Tat Khalsa ideologues’ interpretation of the term *sahaj-dhari*, denoting a Sikh who is not a Khalsa member, to mean ‘slow adopter’, with the obvious connotation that such a Sikh is progressing towards

the full commitment involved in initiation, whereas a less forced etymology would not read *sahaj* as 'slow', but as referring to Guru Nanak's teaching on divine union (McLeod, *Dictionary* 182; *Sikhism* 219, 221).

Yet the hegemony of Tat Khalsa's version of Sikhism at the level of public pronouncements about, and presentations of, Sikhism should not lead one to suppose that Tat Khalsa was successful in eliminating diversity from the community. An ethnographic study conducted in rural Punjab in the early 1980s by Clarence McMullen (73 n.1) yields some evidence of ongoing diversity. The characteristics of popular religiosity are reflected in the currency of the belief that the Sikh Gurus, especially Nanak, were divine (nearly 30% for the Gurus in general, rising to nearly 80% for Nanak in particular) and the frequency with which *akhand paths*, uninterrupted readings of the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, were performed for protection against all kinds of misfortune (over 17%) (ibid 49, 58). The tenets of sectarian movements, such as those of the Nirankaris and Namdharis, were also represented with just under 4% of respondents describing a living figure as the present Guru instead of the *Granth* (scripture) or the *Granth* and *Panth* (scripture and community) (ibid 60).

Similarly, fieldwork undertaken by Ron Geaves (1, 3–4) on the cult of Baba Balaknath, variously regarded as an incarnation of Skanda, son of Shiva, and a predecessor of Guru Nanak, famous for his healing abilities, demonstrates the continuing vitality of popular religiosity, leading to the conclusion that "Sanatan Sikhism is still prevalent in villages throughout the Punjab". Attracting Hindu and Sikh devotees, this cult encompasses Hindu and Sikh resources, even Muslim ones, since pilgrims to Baba Balaknath's *guffa* (shrine) in Himachal Pradesh, India, visit the tomb of a Sufi saint on the way, and thus challenges the conventional model of separate religions (ibid 2, 4–5).

When Sachkhand Nanak Dham is considered in this context, its affinities with Sikh sectarian movements and Punjabi popular religiosity become clear. Mahraz Darshan Das Ji insisted that it was essential to receive *Nam*, the key to spiritual realisation, from a Spiritual Master and he gave *Nam* to those from all faiths (SNDI, "Man of Peace"). Hence Sachkhand Nanak Dham's reverence for a human Guru and rejection of exclusive religious affiliation—teachings that are comparable with those of some Sikh sectarian movements. In addition,

according to his official biography, Mahraz Darshan Das Ji possessed miraculous powers of healing and initiated followers who could also heal people (SNDI, “Man of Peace”; cf. Das Dharam, “Founder”). Thus Sachkhand Nanak Dham's charismatic founder and chosen followers are associated with the pragmatic aspect of Punjabi popular religiosity. Sachkhand Nanak Dham can therefore be located on a broad spectrum of Sikh norms and values. What is more, by analysing significant features of Punjabi religion in historical perspective, it is also possible to suggest that the present state of Sachkhand Nanak Dham is analogous to a previous stage in the development of Sikhism.

Mark Juergensmeyer (*Social Vision 2*) comments that in India, the term ‘religion’ could denote a variety of phenomena: *qaum* defined as “a large religious community”; *panth* defined as “the fellowship of those who revere a lineage of spiritual authority”; and *dharm* defined as “customs and codes of social obligation and spiritual behaviour”. Not only does he note the independence of these elements in the Punjab, citing the example of self-proclaimed Sikhs who are devoted to Muslim saints and guided by Hindu standards, but he points out that the balance between them is subject to change (*ibid*). He proposes that in the past, Sikhism was mainly panthic in nature, but, in the nineteenth century, reformers strove to give the religion a qaumic form of organisation (*ibid*).

Roger Ballard (10–11) elaborates and extends Juergensmeyer's scheme by adding a fourth dimension, the *kismet*, to denote the various means “used to explain the otherwise inexplicable, and if possible to turn adversity in its tracks”. Arguing that Punjabi religion was once predominantly *panthic* and *kismet* with a subordinate *dharmic* strand and little, if any, *qaumic* angle, his thesis is that modern reform movements had *qaumic* ambitions that enhanced the associated *dharmic* dimension, but entailed a repudiation of the *panthic* and *kismet* dimensions (*ibid* 11). Applying this to Sikhism, he outlines the transition from *panth* to *qaum*, beginning his account with Nanak's teaching of interior devotion to achieve union with the divine (*ibid* 28). This Nanak-panth acquired *qaumic* qualities after the first Guru's death, chiefly in Guru Gobind Singh's inauguration of the Khalsa (*ibid* 28–9). Although the Khalsa was a *qaumic* development, it did not unite all Sikhs and, therefore, did not create one Sikh community (*ibid* 29–30). Khalsa Sikhs existed alongside a whole range of other Sikhs, whatever their aspirations towards community solidarity, until *qaumic* processes

polarised religions in the British period, dividing Sikhs from Hindus and Muslims (ibid 30–1). Notwithstanding the *qaumic* and *dharmic* aspects of Tat Khalsa, a new order and a new orthodoxy, both the *panthic* and *kismet* dimensions of Punjabi religion still retain their private rather than public importance (ibid 34–5).

Perhaps Sachkhand Nanak Dham, with its focus on Mahraz Darshan Das Ji and now Maharani Pali Darshan Das Ji or Mahraz Tarlochan Darshan Das Ji, preserves the *panthic* character that typified Sikhism in an earlier era when disciples were gathered together in the presence of their teacher (SNDI, “Annual Function”; Das Dharam “Founder”; “Present Head”). The *kismet* dimension is also in evidence, given the healing abilities of Mahraz Darshan Das Ji and some of his disciples. For example, the survival of Das Balvinder Singh and Das Mahn Singh when shot by police is attributed to Mahraz Darshan Das Ji's invocation of divine power for their protection (Personal E-mail Communication with Prominent Follower of Mahraz Tarlochan Darshan Das Ji, 9–15 December 2005). However, there are some signs of disapproval of *kismet* observance on Sachkhand Nanak Dham International's web site. A question concerning belief in magic, omens, charms, and miracles is answered in terms of belief only in God (SNDI, “Questions and Answers: Sachkhand Nanak Dham). An explanation for this ambivalence may lie in the intention to communicate with an English language constituency (SNDI, “Introduction”) that might be expected to be sceptical about such claims. Whether the different factions take different attitudes towards healing or whether healing assumes more importance in personal testimony than doctrinal formulations is, at this point, a matter for speculation. In any case, there seem to be significant similarities between Sachkhand Nanak Dham and Sikhism, whether assessed in sectarian, popular or historical terms. These can be analysed further by setting out the lives and teachings of Mahraz Darshan Das Ji and Guru Nanak, relating them both to the Sant tradition.

Life and Teaching of Mahraz Darshan Das Ji

According to the hagiography of Mahraz Darshan Das Ji (e.g. SNDI, “Man of Peace”), the young Darshan Lal Vasdev was marked out for great things. A palmist told his father that a power was about to be born, while his pregnant mother heard a voice declaring that her

child had a vital destiny to fulfil. That the boy was special was evident in the reactions of holy men who paid reverence to him, but also in his stoic response to a serious injury which he explained in terms of the suffering he would yet have to endure. The first spiritual revelation he received made little, if any, impression. The second revelation, in contrast, proved decisive. He had taken an office job in an engineering business, but had left after being thrown from his chair when ignoring the message that this was not his true calling. The spiritual experience that followed involved a vision of a ball of light that became a string of prayer beads, each bead of which passed into him. A period of withdrawal lasting almost 40 days ended with a divine summons to begin his ministry.

His preaching entailed a negative view of religions as ordinarily understood (SNDI, “Questions and Answers: Sachkhand Nanak Dham”)—religions were a source of false pride, amounted to nothing more than lip service, and sustained arrogant claims to superior status. Religious leaders denied the unity of humanity inherent in the oneness of God by causing divisions between religions. Religious teachers relied upon the statements of sacred literature and religious practitioners believed it sufficient to discharge ritual obligations. None understood the meaning of life. This meaning, that one should “become a true human being”, was what constituted humanitarianism, regarded as the common theme of all God's messengers. However, the message of humanitarianism was lost and humanity was led astray. Each Spiritual Master brought a pure revelation of the same truth, but—while such revelations were of divine origin—religions were human creations. Religions were the products of the unenlightened and self-serving, characterised by sectarianism and fanaticism. Religions were thus unworthy of absolute allegiance, since true belief and practice could only be learnt from a Spiritual Master in whose absence the inner spirit decayed and only the outer form endured.

The insights of a Spiritual Master did not long survive his death (SNDI, “Questions and Answers: Das Dharam”). Contaminated by ordinary human desires and motives, these insights were compromised and eventually abandoned altogether. What was left, shaped as it was by human shortcomings and not fidelity to the divine message, was religion. By definition, religion was not informed by the truth, because it ignored “the reality behind the religion”. It reflected human aspirations for an easier, more convenient path, displaying

marked tendencies towards formalism and extremism as well as schism. The contrast being set up was between religions and “true religion” (SNDI, “Questions and Answers: Sachkhand Nanak Dham”) and also between religions and “our promise to God” (SNDI, “Questions and Answers: Das Dharam”).

“True religion” lay in humanitarianism (SNDI, “Questions and Answers: Sachkhand Nanak Dham”). An individual who understood this was a better source of knowledge about God than any of the accepted authorities. Religions could and did change, as was evident from the variety of scriptures, but human beings did not. In essence, what humanity required was to keep the promise that everyone made to God. This promise, made before birth, was a promise to worship God and always keep God in mind (SNDI, “Questions and Answers: Das Dharam”). God's promise was to care for each in turn, so long as each continued to remember God. However, once born, this promise was forgotten. As soon as this occurred, revelation gave way to religion. However, Sachkhand Nanak Dham and Das Dharam represented “true religion” and “our promise to God” respectively.

Sachkhand Nanak Dham was open to all who were drawn to its message of humanitarianism and who approached it first and foremost as human beings (SNDI, “Questions and Answers: Sachkhand Nanak Dham”). This message was the same message that had been taught again and again through the ages, equating true religiosity with humanitarianism. Thus Sachkhand Nanak Dham offered a spiritual opportunity to all, irrespective of their membership of different religions. Without making any demands, in another sense it was the means by which someone could embody the truth of their own tradition.

Das Dharam involved the free service of humanity and could be undertaken by anyone, whatever their religious affiliation (SNDI, “Questions and Answers: Das Dharam”). It looked towards the unification of religions consistent with humanity's shared path. The goal was not to consolidate conventional religious affiliation. The number of religions testified to the failure of spiritual vision and, certainly, Das Dharam did not support pretensions to superiority on the part of spokespersons for religion. In reality, such people were lapsed humanitarians and Das Dharam sought to remind them of human ideals and values.

The core of Mahraz Darshan Das Ji's teaching was God, the Spiritual Master and *Nam* (SNDI, "Message"). God was one, his will sovereign throughout creation and his grace the source of salvation. God indwelt humanity, hearing the cries of all his creatures whose innermost thoughts he knew. Indeed, the human being was the pinnacle of creation, although it was essential to awake to one's true identity and respond positively by loving one's fellows, forging a unity with them that reflected the oneness of the divine.

In order to realise God, a Spiritual Master was necessary, as Spiritual Masters had themselves proclaimed time and again (SNDI, "Message"). Yet how was such a Master to be found? Even with ascetic practice, ritual observance, prayer or charity, this was extremely difficult. However, when God chose, one was brought into contact with a Master. The Master served as one's spiritual guide and counsellor, providing the means for the individual to make spiritual progress. The Master was characterised by humility, gentleness, generosity, and altruism. Only through the selfless intervention of a Master could one come to accept God's will. Thus, to all intents and purposes, God and the Master were the same. Concentration on, and faith in, the Master was vital, as everything rested on the Master (SNDI, "Questions and Answers: Naam"). The Master alone could reveal the truth about God and could be present within disciples at all times (SNDI, "Questions and Answers: Spiritual Master").

It was from a Master that a disciple received *Nam*, a priceless treasure that could not be bought at any price (SNDI, "Message"). Accordingly, the four forms of service to the Master began with verbal repetition of *Nam* and, after both manual work and charitable donation, ended with mental offering and acceptance of *Nam*. Recitation of *Nam* thus went beyond verbal repetition to become internalised in the larynx and to reverberate in every heartbeat, until at last *Nam* constituted the core of one's existence and was recited in each breath. This final stage of recitation of *Nam* occurred when one had attained union with God. This was what was meant by distinguishing between the two types of *Nam*: that which could be expressed, whether in the written or spoken word, and that which could not be expressed, but was integral to the human being (SNDI, "Questions and Answers: Naam"). *Nam* as the gift of the Master was produced by the Master's own meritorious actions. Even so, for the seed of *Nam* to flourish, it had to be sown in fertile ground. Its fertility was ensured by

cultivating the virtues of truth, service, and sacrifice. It was through finding a Master, joining his congregation and serving both that one received *Nam*. *Nam* was personal to the individual on whom it was bestowed, the password to an afterlife in the realm of one's Master.

According to Mahraz Darshan Das Ji, the goal of human life was to realise God and thus bring to an end separation from the divine (SNDI, "Message"). Indeed, union with God could only be attained when in human form. It was imperative to make the most of such an opportunity, because the failure to remember God entailed further suffering. This remembrance depended on the divine will, since—unless God so ordained it—the disciple would not find a Master or receive *Nam*. However, the disciple was required to adopt an ethical lifestyle. This did not require renouncing worldly responsibilities, resigning from one's job and abandoning one's family and friends. On the contrary, these responsibilities still had to be discharged, although, following the example of the Master, they were to be discharged in a spirit of detachment.

In general terms, the disciple was urged to remember God constantly and cultivate the virtues of love and truth (SNDI, "Message"). More specifically, members of Das Dharam were to practise four virtues including compassion and truthfulness as well as contentment and meditation (SNDI, "Questions and Answers: Das Dharam"). The call to serve others, irrespective of their religious belief, social position or any other division, entailed a preparedness to suffer in securing others' welfare and an ability to rejoice in this vocation. As part of this discipline, religious bigotry was deprecated, while a commitment to the betterment of the poor and needy was upheld.

Mahraz Darshan Das Ji, Guru Nanak, and the Sant Tradition

Even this cursory overview of Mahraz Darshan Das Ji's life and teaching recalls the life and teaching of Guru Nanak. On his own part, Mahraz Darshan Das Ji acknowledged only that he was a spiritual guide and mediator who imparted knowledge to his disciples, which ended their separation from God (SNDI, "Questions and Answers: Spiritual Master"). He went so far as to reject the feasibility and desirability of any comparison with past messengers. He

stated that there was no scale against which Spiritual Masters could be judged; his concerns about false pride in disciples and the essential role of the Master led him to insist that no comparisons should be made when the question was asked whether his followers were right to compare him with Guru Nanak, Krishna or other figures. Of course, this has not prevented his followers from comparing him with great visionaries from history, such as Gautama Buddha, Gandhi, and Kabir (Das Dharam, “Founder”).

Even if it is spiritually valid to reject these comparisons, the similarities between Mahraz Darshan Das Ji and Guru Nanak are striking. One way of explaining them is by aligning them with the Sant tradition. Indeed, Sachkhand Nanak Dham has been described as *Sant Mat*, certainly by Das Harminder, although—admittedly—this description does not feature prominently in the movement's literature. In the case of Guru Nanak, his affiliation with the Sant tradition as portrayed by McLeod (*Guru Nanak* 157; *Evolution* 5; *Who is a Sikh?* 7) has proven problematic, because it has been interpreted as detracting from Guru Nanak's position as the founder of a new religion with a new revelation (Grewal 146–7).

Notwithstanding this, the Sant tradition provides a focus for discussion as a tradition with a contemporary presence that cannot easily be reconciled with the model of monolithic, separate, and exclusive religions. As a *sampradaya*, it has the characteristic insistence on the importance of the spiritual teacher combined with shared tenets and diffuse limits (McLeod, *Exploring Sikhism* 22).

The term ‘Sant’ may be defined as designating “a person who has achieved a state of spiritual enlightenment or mystical self-realization” (Schomer 2). Although it has been applied generally to any number of sages and seers, in a more limited sense, the term refers to two groups of poet-saints of which the northern group advocated *nirguna bhakti* or devotion to the formless God (ibid 3). This northern group was unified by common ideas rather than by one lineage or community, a unity members themselves recognised in making poetic references to the Sants and in compiling anthologies of the compositions of various Sants (ibid 4). Not only were the Sants drawn from both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds, but also the northern group in particular renounced the authority of *Veda* and *Qur’an*, together with the efficacy of ritual and sacrifice, the relevance of concepts of purity and pollution associated with the caste hierarchy, the value of conventional notions of piety,

and the significance of social position (Vaudeville 21, 23–5). On these grounds—that the Sants did not have common religious origins or show respect for institutionalised religion—the tradition challenges the idea of distinct religions and religious communities, a challenge that was arguably the burden of Guru Nanak's message. Moreover, this is by no means a purely historical question, since the Sant tradition retains vitality to this day. This is witnessed by popular familiarity with medieval Sants as well as the reverence shown for specific Sants by members of associated groups and the Radhasoami movement which claims to represent the Sant tradition in the contemporary world (Juergensmeyer, “Radhasoami Revival” 329–30). Perhaps, Sachkhand Nanak Dham is another expression of Sant ideals, albeit not in the same sense as the current Sikh usage in which the term ‘Sant’ denotes an influential teacher or important leader, among whose number Mahraz Darshan Das Ji himself might be counted (Tatla, “Nurturing” 352–5, 367). In this line of reasoning, a common inheritance could explain why the messages of Guru Nanak and Mahraz Darshan Das Ji were so similar. Yet, even if this explanation is not accepted, the similarities between the lives and teachings of Guru Nanak and Mahraz Darshan Das Ji are still striking.

Life and Teaching of Guru Nanak

Just as in the case of Mahraz Darshan Das Ji, the hagiographical *janam-sakhis* establish the special status of Guru Nanak (McLeod, *Guru Nanak* 36–64). His birth was attended by great celebration and his childhood was distinguished by his spiritual interests and insights, leading Hindus and Muslims alike to express wonder. Instructed by a *pandit*, the young Nanak impressed him with his superior wisdom in discoursing upon the futility of worldly learning. He made much the same impression on a *mullah* when he was prevailed upon to speak concerning the transience of existence. Miraculous events surrounded Nanak, the subject of divine favour, as in the restoration of a crop ruined by buffaloes that the sleeping Nanak had failed to control and the unmoving shadow of a tree under which Nanak was resting. He was drawn towards spiritual matters; on one occasion, after a night spent with companions in the praise of God, he went to the river to bathe. He was then taken to the Court of the Lord, given a cup of nectar to drink and told to preach the divine Name. On his return, he famously declared that there was neither Hindu nor Muslim and, when asked whose path one should follow, answered that he would follow God's path and that God was

neither Hindu nor Muslim. Nanak's mystical experience and reflection upon it were followed by his missionary journeys, during which he met and won over many holy people and worked further miracles. Thus Guru Nanak's revelation inaugurated his ministry, a pattern later repeated in the life of Mahraz Darshan Das Ji.

Guru Nanak, in a manner echoed by Mahraz Darshan Das Ji, adopted a critical stance towards the systems of belief and practice of his day (McLeod, *Guru Nanak* 208–13). He was insistent that conventional forms of religiosity had no value. He poured scorn on image worship, such as performing rites to stones, rejecting both bathing at pilgrimage sites and the world-renouncing tendencies of ascetic practices. He had no faith in meritorious action or mystical powers and was critical of all religious leaders, *brahmins*, *pandits* and *yogis*, *qazis*, *mullahs*, and *sheikhs*. True religiosity lay not in external things, but in inner qualities, a sentiment that led him to interpret the outward observance as meaningless and to identify an alternative moral virtue or spiritual principle for every aspect of institutionalised religiosity, including buildings, ceremonies, books, and officiants. Here too, the teachings of Guru Nanak and Mahraz Darshan Das Ji made much the same point in criticising established religions. However, Mahraz Darshan Das Ji's analysis of the role of the Spiritual Master would seem to be applicable to Guru Nanak and identify him as such a teacher. Moreover, Mahraz Darshan Das Ji's account of the rise of religion after the Master's death could be considered relevant to the development of the Sikh tradition, certainly its orthodox version, in which the line of human Gurus came to an end in 1708.

In common with Mahraz Darshan Das Ji, Guru Nanak taught that there was but one God (McLeod, *Guru Nanak* 163–77). Guru Nanak's monotheistic vision meant that this one God was addressed by many names. Transcendent and immanent, God was the creator who cared for the world and who exercised infinite power and authority over all that had been made. Although the human mind could not fully grasp the divine nature, God was nevertheless accessible; pervading creation and existing in the human heart, God was revealed in the world and found within humanity. Thus, through the working of divine grace, union with God could be achieved.

Even so, for Guru Nanak as for Mahraz Darshan Das Ji, it was necessary to have a teacher (McLeod, *Guru Nanak* 196–9). Guru Nanak taught that, without the Guru, there was only useless effort, but with the Guru, it was possible to attain union with God. Guru Nanak understood Guru to be God (the true or original Guru), the divine voice, and God's Word (a form of revelation and a means of salvation). Perhaps in this instance, despite an equivalence between God and the Master at some level, the closer comparison with Mahraz Darshan Das Ji is with the later Sikh tradition. This is because the tradition honoured Guru Nanak's role as a messenger by according him the title Guru that was subsequently given to his nine human successors and then, in the orthodox version of events, vested jointly in the scripture and community as *Guru Granth* and *Guru Panth* respectively (McLeod, *Dictionary* 96). Nevertheless, a measure of ambiguity about the existence of a human as well as a divine Guru runs through the Sant tradition (Vaudeville 33–4). The early Sants may have regarded God as Guru, but in so doing themselves served as foci for devotion and sources of lineages (Gold 306–8).

There is clearer agreement between Guru Nanak and Mahraz Darshan Das Ji on the subject of *Nam*. In this respect, too, Mahraz Darshan Das Ji's account centred on the Spiritual Master as a human being who had achieved union with God. For Guru Nanak, remembrance of *Nam* was only possible through the grace of the Guru (McLeod, *Guru Nanak* 195–6, 214–9). No religious or moral observance was effective, for, without *Nam*, life was futile, leading only to suffering, death, and continued transmigration. In contrast, one who meditated on *Nam* could enter the Court of the Lord and be freed from the trammels of conditioned existence. This was because *Nam* revealed the fullness of the divine nature and, by its remembrance, selfishness and delusion were overcome and in their place arose virtue and truth. Remembrance involved more than verbal repetition, since it was essentially an inner process of contemplation on the divine leading to a complete transformation, ever closer to God in all things. Remembrance of *Nam* extended to the collective worship of God, when hymns of praise were sung by the community, since this, too, was focused upon, and drew participants nearer to, the divine. Yet, in order for this to occur, it was necessary to conduct oneself appropriately. Using much the same imagery that was later to be employed by Mahraz Darshan Das Ji, Guru Nanak likened *Nam* to seed. Properly cultivated by its

remembrance as well as by ethical qualities, such as peace, modesty, purity, and love, it yielded a spiritual crop. Ultimately, it brought union with God.

Just as for Mahraz Darshan Das Ji, for Guru Nanak, the goal of human life was to realise God (McLeod, *Guru Nanak* 219–26). Union with the divine entailed a complete reorientation of the self, leaving behind worldliness and moving towards godliness. The ever-growing identification with the divine was evoked in the five *khands* or stages culminating in Sach Khand, the realm of truth where that unity was achieved, bringing absolute fulfilment in an experience that ever endured. It is noteworthy that the fifth and highest stage described by Guru Nanak and indeed his name, even if differently defined, feature in the title that Mahraz Darshan Das Ji bestowed on the movement he founded. Certainly, union with God was a divine gift, for—unless God so willed—it would not be possible to recognise the Guru or *Nam*.

Yet, according to Guru Nanak, there was still a part for human effort as an appropriate response to divine grace (McLeod, *Guru Nanak* 211–2). Devotion to God did not mean renunciation of the world any more than it would for Mahraz Darshan Das Ji. Guru Nanak advocated living in the world, but not being of the world. Hence one should not abandon one's family, but rather maintain an attitude of detachment. This allowed for the reconciliation of spirituality with other duties and obligations, making it unnecessary and unproductive to withdraw from the world in order to make spiritual progress.

Concluding Observations and Future Prospects

This article has considered whether Sachkhand Nanak Dham can be called a Sikh movement while acknowledging that this is not an issue of importance for members. It has been argued that there is a close connection between Sikhism and Sachkhand Nanak Dham, an argument that has involved analysing the concept of Sikhism as both an academic and activist category. On this basis, some commonalities have been found between Punjabi popular religiosity and Sikh sectarian movements on the one hand and Sachkhand Nanak Dham on the other hand. It has also been proposed that Sachkhand Nanak Dham can be compared with a past form of Sikhism, notably before the changes of the modern era. Perhaps the

most striking similarities that have been identified are those between the lives and teachings of Mahraz Darshan Das Ji and Guru Nanak, possibly explicable in terms of a common alignment with the Sant tradition. Although links with the Sant tradition have often proved contentious, it has been suggested that, where Mahraz Darshan Das Ji and Guru Nanak do differ, later versions of the Sant tradition as well as the Sikh tradition afford analogies.

This, in turn, leads to new questions about the future of Sachkhand Nanak Dham. In a story often told by Das Harminder to illustrate the degeneration from wisdom to conformity, a Spiritual Master was instructing his disciples when a puppy approached. In an effort to continue his discourse, the Master had the puppy tied up to a nearby tree. In years to come, however, no discourse could be delivered without a dog being tethered to a tree, despite the fact that this no longer served any practical purpose and none understood its meaning. Is it possible for Sachkhand Nanak Dham to avoid becoming a religion in the sense that its founder defined, where the message of a Spiritual Master has degenerated from revelatory insight to institutionalised orthodoxy?

Part of the answer to questions about its future may lie in the roles of Maharani Pali Darshan Das Ji and Mahraz Tarlochan Darshan Das Ji, specifically if there will be a lineage of living Masters, as previously characterised mainstream Sikhism and still characterises some of its sectarian movements as well as Sant-based groups. Possible parallels for the position of Maharani Pali Darshan Das Ji include Mata Sahib Kaur, named mother of the Khalsa, just as Maharani Pali Darshan Das Ji was hailed mother of the mission, and Mata Sundari, a widow of Guru Gobind Singh at the head of the group of Sikhs who opposed Banda Bahadur (cf. Personal E-mail Communication with Prominent Follower of Mahraz Tarlochan Darshan Das Ji, 9–15 December 2005; SNDI, “Introduction”). Neither of these parallels suggest a lineage of living Masters, but those who support Maharani Pali Darshan Das Ji's cause stress her identification with Mahraz Darshan Das Ji as the only one in the mission to receive his name, perhaps implying a parallel with Guru Nanak's designation of a successor whom he named Angad or ‘limb’, thereby indicating that the latter was an extension of the former (cf. SNDI, “Annual Function” 5–6). Possible parallels for the position of Mahraz Tarlochan Darshan Das Ji abound in Sikhism's later Guru period where guruship was passed down to

male descendants of Ram Das and in numerous other religious movements where son succeeds father (cf. Das Dharam, "Present Head"). Supporters of Mahraz Tarlochan Darshan Das Ji establish his credentials by emphasising how his leadership has produced a notable growth in membership and gained him an international television audience on a devotional channel (cf. Personal E-mail Communication with Prominent Follower of Mahraz Tarlochan Darshan Das Ji, 9–15 December 2005). Nevertheless, whether either Maharani Pali Darshan Das Ji or Mahraz Tarlochan Darshan Das Ji (or indeed both) will take their place in a lineage of living Masters, only time will tell.

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ⁱⁱ This communication has been anonymised, given the sensitivity of some of the issues discussed and hence does not feature in the list of references.