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Yoga (jog) and meditation (dhiaan) abound in the Guru Granth Sahib (hereafter GGS). From the above verse one might think that if God, the True-Guru, is said to be the true yogi and ‘the way’ of yoga itself, then Sikhs would believe in and practise yoga (as commonly understood). But this is not the case. Understanding why this is so is crucial to gain insight into gur-sikhii — the way of un/learning guided by the Guru, that Sikhi(sm) fosters.

Medieval background: Indian renaissance and Gur-Sikh Enlightenment

The GGS includes ideas and terms of yoga (jog) and meditation (dhiaan) that are found in ancient and medieval soteriological literature. It is, however, important to read these in the wider context of the Sikh Gurus’ critique of the Vedas, shastras and smritis, and the ideals of sacrifice, renunciation, asceticism and meditation. Similarly, the GGS’s comparative and critically inclusive verses also engage Upanishadic insights, Samkhyan assumptions, Puranic notions of devotion, tantric esoterism and various yoga teachings and practices, reinterpreting karma- and jnana- yogas in its particular bhakti/bhagati-jog as the way of the Name (naam-maarag). However, the Sikh Gurus’ more immediate context involved direct engagements with the Indian renaissance composed of the ubiquitous and influential Nath Yogis (or Kanphata/Hatha Yogis), but also Buddhist Siddhas, Buddhist and Hindu Tantrikas, Shaiva and Vaishnava Sahajiyas — engaging with their key notions of guru, word (sabda/shabhad), nirvana (nirbaan), impermanence (anityyaa/velaa, calanaa, aavan-jaan), essencelessness (shuunyataaa/sunni) and effortlessness (sahaja/sahaj), not to mention their shared esoteric vocabulary (turiyyaa/chauta-pad, sunni-samaadh, dasam-duaar, siv-sakati). Through this discursive engagement, the GGS questions the exclusive and metaphysical conception of ‘God’ as well as yoga’s ascetic elitism, and thereby rejects the necessity for ‘divine’ languages and ‘esoteric’ vocabularies. It elucidates its way via multiple ‘vernaculars’ taken from a composite people diverse in language, tradition, caste, class, ethnicity and geography. The GGS accepted select songs of non-Sikh ‘saints’ (sants/bhagats) as part of its own pluriversal revelations, marking out the comparative uniqueness of its universally resonant voice.
The GGS speaks of ‘a way beyond ways’, one that is beyond the techniques, rituals and practices that stabilise the ego. It is inclusive of different paths and expressions, but not without a critique of those paths. To be able to criticise and not dismiss – where the difference of the other is not a challenge to one’s own tradition, but a natural expression of life’s diversity – and thus to find a resonant pluriversal truth across traditions, is the unique contribution of the Sikh Gurus. This new way of un/learning (de- and reconditioning) brought manifold secrets of the ascetics into the households of the everyday person: Upanishadic and yogic transcendentalism became humanised by the devotee’s (bhagat’s) everyday existentialism; anti-Brahmanic metaphors of relationships between master and student, parent and child, lovers, and friends became the new vocabulary of a soteriological and ‘worldly’ life. Direct communion with the numinous was to be found right there in one’s phenomenal existence, via the Guru’s guidance.

The affective language of the heart became a new lingua franca of expressing the highest conceptual truth: ‘knowing’ (jnana) was thereby recontextualised by ‘longing’ (viraha/vijog, bhuukh) for the divine/Name. Communal forms of soteriological practice arose, singing the praises of the divine/Name. Praise itself became the way. This spread of bhakti saw the rise of a new religiosity centred around the (only true) universal soteriological forces: the True-Guru, His/His Word and God’s Name. However, early modern bhakti was largely framed within anapolitical semi-renunciation of the world. Although it had the potential to be revolutionary, it rarely challenged the hierarchy of the prevailing social order. Though it criticised the hypocrisy and ignorance of priestly hierarchies, it rarely instigated political revolution.

Unlike other bhakti movements, then, the Sikh Gurus used their notion of direct communion with the numinous in the everyday to launch a socio-political movement, thus forming the Gur-Sikh Enlightenment. This resulted in an epistemic shift from the personal and dualistic to the non-dual and collective – as evidenced by the recontextualisation of scripture within the Guru, mantra within the Word, self-effort (technique) within Other-power (grace), culminating in the democratisation of the Guru (at Baisakhi) into the people’s will (panj piaare, khaalsaa). The Sikh Gurus employ terms, concepts and ideas from multiple traditions to express their own distinct, compound, dialogical and nuanced ‘cross-tradition-less tradition’.

Guru Granth Sahib’s critique of yoga and meditation

The Gur-Sikh tradition maintains two seats of authority, reflecting two forms of sovereignty: aasan and takhat. It is important not to confuse Sikh aasan with the Upanishads’ meditational āsana, hathayoga’s complex āsanas, or modern yoga’s postural āsanas. First, aasan (seat, posture) represents a private authority and sovereignty over the ego. Aasan elicits a transcendental experience of inner equipoise, illumination and love – it is a form of inner spirituality. In the mastery of the mind the Sikh Gurus repose in the seat (aasan) of ‘effortless absorption’ (sahaji dhiaan).7 Second, takhat (throne) represents a seat of authority and sovereignty that chooses governance of the public sphere over tyranny. The Gur-Sikh ‘true king’ is therefore also a ‘jogii’ or saint who sits on the throne of truth, administrating true justice.8 By occupying both forms of yogic and regal authority, the gurus’ invented a new middle way, calling it raaj-jog, that was simultaneously private and political.9 Only those of such a double orientation were considered legitimate administrators of justice.10 Gur-Sikh raaj-jog is a singular notion that contains within it a diversity of different types of union (spanning ascetic-yogic, householder-bhaktic and royal formularies). The two seats together form the Gur-Sikh way of love as justice (raaj-jog), which
updates the Buddhist 'middle way' (majjhima-patipadaa). Just as the Buddha found the middle way between kingly indulgence and ascetic denial, so too did the Sikh Gurus solicit the spiritual (udaas) within the temporal (grihast). The integration of both seats and forms of sovereignty marks Gur-Sikh jogi as unique, expressing no love without justice, no spiritual transcendence without social responsibility, no saint (sant) without soldier (sipaahi) and no rule without equality.

Uberoi (1996) argued that the separated and independent domains of the state (rajyas/kashatriya), civil society (grihast/brahmana) and religion (sannayas/shramana) expressed by medieval Hindu and Islamic paradigms (raajaa/brahman/sannyaasii; sultan/ulemaa/suufi), were collapsed within and by the Gur-Sikh tradition. This allowed the Guru and Gurmukh to operate in all three seamlessly. Not dividing off the domains into opposed forms of life within gur-sikhii represented for Uberoi the first Indian non-dual modernity. Expressed architecturally, the mystical seat (aasan) evolved into the Harmandir Sahib (popularly known as the ‘Golden Temple’), which brought asceticism (jogi, udaasii) into family life (bhogii, girasat), forming part of the Indic renaissance of the Siddhas, Sufis, Sahajiyas, Sants and Bhaktas. The latter temporal seat (takhat) was formed as the political centre in the building of the Akaal Takhat (‘throne of the timeless’). It brings the new ascetic-householder (jogi-bhogii) ideal into the realm of governance (raaj) and justice (niau) that expresses Gur-Sikh Enlightenment of raaj-jogi. The Guru/Gurmukh/Khalsa occupies both spaces of loving-saint and just-king, juxtaposing forest, house and battlefield with ashram, mandir and mahal, making raaj-jogi a political mysticism rarely developed elsewhere. That is to say, the Sikh tradition proposes nothing short of a double enlightenment: ‘spiritual/mystical’ and ‘social/political’ as an ‘enlivenment’. This is precisely what allows the inclusive (non-converting) critique of GGS’s ideal of what makes a ‘true’ yogi, qazi and brahmin.

Having considered the proper ascetic-familial, socio-political and religio-political frames of Guru Nanak’s vision we are now positioned to ask, of what does the GGS’s critique of yoga and meditation consist?

**Aasan (spiritual yoga)**

First, it is important to recognise that ‘critique’ (vicaar, buuj) in the GGS is not issued from a centre that could be formulated, thus allowing comparisons to a fixed notion of truth. There is nothing fixed at the ‘centre’ of gur-sikhii, not Self (aatman), not No-Self (maaatman), not God alone nor some impersonal absolute. This is because all centres are metaphysical foils – if not projections of the ego (false centre). The Gur-Sikh ‘source’ (ikk-oankaar), which is ‘everywhere everything’, is an inexplicable mystery and wonder (vismaad) defined only by fungible terms: viz., True One, God, Guru, Word and Name. The GGS’s inclusion of Abrahamic and Indic personal deities (Allah, Khuda, Rahim; Hari, Shiva, Devi), and impersonal absolutes (nirbaan, punish, siv-sakati) to name Ikk-Oankaar, is both affirmative (in not desiring conversion respecting diversity) but also analytical (in requiring transformation to a pluriversal vision).

The Gur-Sikh critique of *yoga* occurs within the broader ideas outlined above. For example:

That yogi (jogi) does not know the way.

Understand that his heart is filled with greed, attachment, delusion and egotism.

*(GGS 685 Dhanaasarii M9)*

Here the yogi is criticized for turning yoga into an empty ritual, the by-product of a systematisation of practice over truthful living. The Gur-Sikh way (of the Name and Guru’s Word) cannot be captured without the danger of objectification (i.e. the reduction to a thing or technique); *mantras* can be fixed, but not the Word; the Word can include yoga, but yoga is outstripped by
the Word. The true yogi is one who looks upon ‘gold and iron’, ‘pleasure and pain’ alike,\textsuperscript{15} such that the way of the Name (\textit{naam-maarag}) displaces the need for particular techniques (\textit{mantar-jap}), because it is inseparable from an existential praxis of being true (\textit{saciaaraa, sac-kamai}). The Word (\textit{shabad}) is different to itself as it is revealed through an ongoing quotidian encounter where ‘Truth’ (\textit{saachi}) is constantly surpassed by the necessity of truthful living (\textit{saacu aacaar}).\textsuperscript{16}

As the following passages show, \textit{naam-maarag} and the practice of the Guru’s Word (\textit{gur-shabad kamai}) are not tied to a mantra, ritual or technique delimited by caste hierarchy:

The root mantra is spiritual wisdom (\textit{giaanu}) for everyone. Anyone, from any class (\textit{cahu vaananaa}), may chant the Name. Whoever chants it, is emancipated …

It cannot be obtained by any religious rituals (\textit{dharami}).

O Nanak, he alone obtains it, whose karma is so pre-ordained. (\textit{GGS 274 Gaurii Sukhamanii M5})

Without the Name, all actions are futile, like the magician who deceives through illusions. (\textit{GGS 1343 Prabhaatii M1})

The new Gur-Sikh frame of \textit{naam-maarag} – involving inner recollection (\textit{simaran}) and outer service (\textit{sevaa}) where truthful living requires an orientation towards justice (\textit{niaa}) – formulates an equitable political yoga. I take this to represent a double sovereignty (of self-realisation and social justice) that displaces and reinterprets earlier forms of power, whether martial, Brahmanical or ascetic. As such, the Sikh Gurus emancipated restricted notions of the personal divine or the impersonal absolute.\textsuperscript{17} An important strategy used by the Sikh Gurus in their critique is the trope of ‘dis-emplotment’: to dislodge what each tradition takes as universal and locate it within the Gur-Sikh comparative context of the pluriversal Guru, Word and Name, but without negating the power or relevance of the ‘dis-emplotted’ term. Those diverse traditional terms are kept but re-employed to express a pluriversal reality of a wholly inclusive existential praxis. The critique of yoga occurs in this manner, for example:

The Word is yoga, the Word is gnosis [for the yogi]; the Word is Vedas for the brahmin. The Word is bravery for the kshatriya; the Word is service to others for the shudra.

For one who discerns this secret: the Word for all is the One Word (\textit{eka-shabadan}). (\textit{GGS 1353 Sahasakritii M1})

The dis-emplotment and re-employment of ‘yoga’ and ‘meditation’ follow this major trope of the \textit{GGS}: diversity is sacred when tied to the Word (\textit{shabad}). ‘Yoga’, ‘Wisdom’, ‘Vedas’, etc., are taken out of the plot in which they claim universal relevance, and replaced within Guru Nanak’s pluriversal (cross-traditional, multi-caste, comparative) vision of many namings. Guru-Shabad and Naam work as the inexpressible force behind everything, and remind all that the universal can only be approached through the inclusion of every tradition’s imaginations. Guru Nanak is, therefore, not a peddler of specific techniques or mantras but the revealer of an unforeseen pluriversal way that engages key ideas of other paths:

Meditation of meditators? – good is the meditation on the Name of Hari, Hari.

Renunciation of renouncers? – good is the renunciation of lust, anger and greed.

Begging of beggars? – good is the begging for the Lord’s praise gained from the Guru. (\textit{GGS 1018 Maaruu M5})
A person may initially practise meditation to overcome greed, anger and lust, however with the likely deferral of the goal the practice may become the goal itself, with the meditator not necessarily cognizant of such a shift having taken place. The treachery of techniques is clear: they replace the transformation that they promised to become the focus themselves. In the GGS all practices – here meditation, renunciation and begging – are reframed, to place the focus on the ego (haumai), to unsettle what the ego has always assumed to be efficacious and true.

The GGS as a whole may be understood as a disputation against the efficacy of human techniques (shrines, clothes, rituals, mantras, songs, etc.) summed up as ‘100,000 clevernesses’ humans may devise (GGS 1 Japu M1). The transformation or the ego-mind-state comes first, not the technique, method or practice. The gurus simply bring us back to the hard work of the real task: disarming and dismantling the common ego – the one that (too easily) makes techniques a part of its progressive arsenal:

The Digambara may take off his clothes and be naked.
What yoga (jogu) does he practice by having matted and tangled hair?
If the heart-mind is not pure, [forget] the Tenth Gate (dasavai duaara)!
The fool wanders and wanders, entering the cycle of reincarnation again and again.

(GGS 1169 Basant M3)

How, then, is one to proceed without techniques? Is truth ‘a pathless land’ (as Krishnamurti claimed)? If (modern) yoga’s goal is health of the physical body, no one would argue against its efficacy. But re-emplotted within the context of subjective awakening and political freedom, can physical yoga avoid being humbled, like every other technique or expedient? This is the challenge of the Sikh Gurus’ repeated question: what is efficacious?  

Given that ‘God (hari) cannot be found by any technique (upai),’ without the transformation of the heart-mind (eradicating lust, anger, greed, delusion and pride), what use is any private technique, physical or mental? The devolution of traditions to mere technical specialisms (of vocabulary and ritual) was precisely what the gurus were reformulating into a new synthesis of the Guru’s quotidian and existential Word-praxis.

**True yoga as sahaj-jog**

The notion of true yoga and its practitioner, the true yogi, result from the dis-employment found within the GGS. A key term used in the GGS is sahaj, meaning ‘natural, easy; spontaneous; effortless; beatific’, and is understood as innate. It relates to a deep yearning of what the body remembers. This makes sahaj an ‘originary’ condition prior to yoga. Sahaj as simaran – a form of non-egoic ‘remembrance’ – is beautifully expressed by Namdev: a boy flies a kite while talking to his friends, a girl carries a pitcher laughing with her friends, a mother remembers her child in the cradle whether she works in the kitchen or the field, just as the cow never forgets her calf in a faraway field. Though these symbolise the uneducated, untrained remembering of natural beings, for Namdev they become perfect exemplars recalling the Name, valued over the highly trained Siddhas and Nath Yogis and their esoteric knowledge, complex techniques and specialised practices. Unlike the elitism of the yogis, Namdev does not exclude anyone. Simaran is not therefore a technical skill but a form of awareness expressed in everyday praxis, open to all to engage spontaneously and effortlessly, almost without thinking. This is sahaj-jog, a pluriversal praxis not an idiosyncratic device.

A hymn by Guru Nanak starts with a kundalini/tantric trope of the inverted lotus, and the tenth esoteric gate (beyond the nine bodily apertures) from which trickles the ambrosial nectar, but switches quickly to what is really required: not ascetic meditation, not singing, not mantras, not rituals, etc., but the surrender of one’s own mind, the ‘naughting’ of oneself, in order to
return home inheriting an infinitely expanded and transformed non-dual vision. Sahaj points towards a philosophy of the event of one’s existential and moment-by-moment life: ‘Whatever the Lord does, look upon that as good; thus, will you obtain the treasure of sahaj-jog’. Thus, the mundane world as Word is always already a teaching: the space–time continuum is soteric, hence ‘one who understands hukam (God’s Will, Order, Command, or the inscription of the Word in creation) is called a yogi’. And then ‘whatever they speak is wisdom (giaan) / whatever they hear is the Name / whatever they see is meditation (dhiaan)’, they sleep in sahaj, awake in sahaj. If the yogis (jogiaa), wandering ascetics (jangama), renouncers (sanniaasii), as well as the ‘saints’ (saadhus) and the virtuous (gunii), have tried everything and failed in calming and mastering anger, hatred, desire, then the Sikh Gurus are unlikely to offer yet more techniques. Not only have they failed, they have also wasted their lives, erred and gone astray, leaving behind an inflated sense of egotism (ahankaar) and arrogance (garab). Guru Nanak implores ascetics and householders to practise true yoga (saac- jog), viz., ‘subdue the five thieves, and hold your consciousness in its place’ and ‘discern the Word of the Guru by losing your ego-mind’. Thus, all the Sikh Gurus remain sceptical of any and all answers the ego-mind proff ers: ‘He alone is a devotee, whom the Lord has united with Himself. Abandoning all devices (ukati) and contrivances (upaavaa), I have sought the (only real) Renunciate’s [God’s] Sanctuary’. Guru Nanak presents an axiomatic sequence: because you do not know, listen (suniai); having heard, consider and accept (maniai). If you accept, then act, or serve (sevaa) with loving devotion (bhaau). Techniques and their mastery fool one into believing one’s knowledge is superior and unknown by others. But life will not be mastered; rather, only the ego can be humbled. In short, ‘by listening one effortlessly enters meditation’ (suniai laagai sahaji dhiaanu). ‘Hearing the Name’ (naai suniai), only then are ‘supernatural powers’, ‘wealth’, ‘contentment’, etc., received. There is a crucial reversal going on here. It is not that there are techniques so that you can hear the Name, but that one can hear the Name in all techniques, making no one technique better than another; the Name is yoga, but yoga is not the (way to the) Name.

Takhat (political yoga): raaj-jog

Guru Arjan sings

I came to the Guru to learn the way of yoga. The True-Guru has revealed it to me through the Word … I have brought the five disciples … under my control … That place where there is no fear, becomes my seated posture (aasan). And that aasan becomes the foundation of political justice:

One who keeps Naam in his heart attains the immoveable seat (aasan).
One who keeps Naam in his heart is seated on the throne (takhat).
One who keeps Naam in his heart is the true king (saah).

(GGS 1156 Bhairau M5)

The subjective sovereignty of the mystic state is the true aasan, but it is only half the story. The other half is the objective sovereignty of the true king who sits on the true throne (takhat):

It is very difficult to serve the True-Guru: Give your head; lose yourself.
One who dies through the Word shall never die again; his service is totally approved.

(GGS 649 Sorathi M3)
Guru Amar Das captures in four words the double sovereignty of raaj-jog in its most pared down form: ‘siru diijai aapu gavaai’ – not only the saint’s sacrifice of the self (spiritual death of ego-mind), but also of the soldier’s head (political death of body). It is this double sacrifice that precludes sahaj from being reduced to subjective relativism. In the Gur-Sikh notion of double sovereignty raaj-jog does not allow just anyone to be a king – it has to be a saint, or someone that has killed the ego-mind through the Word. Such a one enters not only private realms of bliss but also public realms of justice that takhat symbolises:

The true One’s law (hukam) is effective everywhere; the Gurmukh merges in its truth.  
He Himself is true, true is His throne (takhat), seated, He administers true justice (niaau).  
The truest of the true pervades everywhere; the Gurmukh sees the unseen.  
(GGS 949 Raamakalii M3)

Not only does God make creation His throne, he also establishes that takhat within each body (kaaiaa). Those ‘who can discern the Word’ (objectively and subjectively), then, also ‘sit upon His throne’ for “The true Lord fashioned the earth for the sake of the Gurmukhs’. Consequently, and without desire or effort, they obtain the eight supernatural powers (asad siddhi) and ‘all wisdom’ (sabhi buddhi), knowing fully both worldliness (paravinati) and renunciation (naravinati). Guru Arjan adds: ‘Your consciousness becomes steady and firm (when) forest (ban) and household (grih) are seen as the same.’ The renouncer and the householder are no longer polarised but reframed, such that raaj-jog can be practised ‘being in the world but not of the world’ (loga alogii).

Splitting raaj-jog in the conversion to western modernity

In the incalculably violent conversion to Euro–American (globalatinised Christian) modernity, two key historical markers instigated the splitting of gur-sikhii’s raaj from jog (Derrida 2001; 2002; Van der Veer 1996). The first was the colonial encounter with the British, and the second was the invention of India and Pakistan as (modern) ‘nations’ through the tragedy and trauma of Partition. After two Anglo–Sikh wars, the British annexed the Panjab and de-militarised the Sikh kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1849. Under this colonial subjugation the Gur-Sikh middle way was broken, eventually splintering into opposing Sikh revival and reform movements. Given the run-up to independence and the birth of India as a modern nation state in 1947, the constitutional separation of church and state effectively ‘religionised’ sant/jog in the formation of ‘Sikhism’ and ‘secularised’ sipaadhi/raaj into political movements (Mandair 2013). The secular frame of modernity both rests upon and demands such a polarised duality (i.e. secular vs religious). Furthermore, given the transformative power of nineteenth-century European technologies in India (census, cartography, print, telegraph, railways, roads and canals), various forms of ‘Sikh yoga’, whether Thind’s mental focus or 3HO’s physical focus (see below), sought similarly modern techniques. In this shift from premodern raag-jog to the technique-isation of the twentieth century, Sikh groups’ privatised modes of ‘religious’ practice became the only form compatible with colonial modernity’s political economy; such movements flourished because they could pass unnoticed as apolitical. The 1960s counter–culture furthered this privatisation of religious practice, resulting in the widespread capitalisation and commodification of selling spirituality and yoga: God wore the collar of the dollar whether in the gym or the ashram (Carrette and King 2005; Jain 2015). With Gur-Sikh raaj-jog’s sovereignty disarmed, Sikh yoga became malleable to the global market. The capitalist marketplace can countenance spiritualities, and even make their ‘spiritual materialism’ profitable, but only where stripped of their collective voice of resistance (Trungpa 1987).
Yet, Sikhs from the beginning have understood that ‘power concedes nothing without a demand’, as evidenced by a long history of resistance movements speaking truth to power (Bhogal 2010; 2011). However, none of these movements are classed under the category of ‘Sikh yoga’, given the frame imposed by colonial modernity, wherein yoga was to be identified only with asan and sant, and not with takhat and sipahii. Clearly, the opposite is also true: if jog was reduced to ‘religion’, then raaj was similarly reduced to ‘politics’. The split augured by modernity led to political movements with no jog or sant to speak of. Given the teachings of the GGS and the fact that the first and last Sikh Gurus are popularly known as ‘Nanak Shaah-Fakiir’ and ‘Guru Gobind Singh Baadshaah-Dervish’, revealing the inseparability of raaj-jog, it is therefore problematic to countenance such contemporary Sikh yoga movements, along with political movements lacking sant/jog, as legitimate. Within the contemporary scene all the various ‘Sikh yoga’ movements reflect such a neutering of Gur-Sikh anti-caste political spirituality into purely subjective forms or privatised practice.

Contemporary scene: Sikh yoga and meditation movements

We have already noted gur-sikhii’s critique of yoga and meditation, as well as the gurus’ acerbic dismissal of religious spectacle (‘outward show’). Guru Nanak’s oddly familiar critique of the paraphernalia of yogic cults is therefore equally as applicable today as it was five centuries ago. Indeed, the GGS is perhaps the only comprehensive and sustained Indic critique of jog, and as such presents a clear lacuna in western scholarship in general and yoga studies in particular. Even recent works charting the history of yoga’s invented mental and physical modern forms (from Vivekananda’s mid-1890s ‘raja yoga’ to the contemporary transnational anglophone ‘Hatha Yoga’) neglect the GGS. This is partly understandable as gur-sikhii and yoga (i.e. not jog) are rarely associated by Sikhs. The association is limited to those movements that acquiesced to modernity’s bifurcating forces. ‘Sikh yoga’ is a modern phenomenon that only European, American and Canadian Sikhs have partial familiarity with and Indian Sikhs find offensive and bizarre.

Often in discussions of Sikhism and yoga, two individuals are mentioned: Guru Nanak’s son Sri Chand, founder of the Udaasiis (sixteenth century), and Yogi Bhajan, founder of 3HO (twentieth century) and chiefly responsible for the American conflation of ‘Sikhism’ and ‘yoga’ (Desliffe 2012; 2016). The former practised a form of ascetic ‘yoga’ rejected by Guru Nanak’s worldly focus. The latter’s yoga is inflected by the international physical culture movement as a counter-cultural New Age ‘religion/dharma’. Neither could be seriously entertained as having any real relation to Gur-Sikh teachings. Were one to look for figures and movements not related to ‘yoga’ but to the GGS’s ‘raaj-jog’, then the list is indeed much longer, including (to varying degrees): Khalsa Singhs, Bandai Sikhs, Akalis, Nihangs, Nirankaris, Namdhariis, Singh Sabha reformers, Babbar Akalis, Akali Dal, SGPC, Nanaksar Movement, Bhai Randhir Singh, Akhand Kirtani Jatha, and Babbar Khalsa (Bhogal 1996). None of these, given their integration of raaj, are seen as yogic traditions.

Given the two major orientalising discursive formations of Euro-American modernity’s appropriation of Asian ‘spiritual cultures’, as either meditational (‘Zen Mind’) or postural (‘Yoga Body’), the following individuals and groups can be mapped accordingly. The ease of this mapping illuminates the problematic nature of contemporary yoga from the perspective of the GGS, as such apolitical forms reveal their unacknowledged conversion to modernity. Unrelated to gur-sikhii is the Radhasoami movement founded by Shiv Dyal Singh in 1861. I mention it because its conceptual vocabulary is largely taken from the GGS – for example, its main focus is surat-shabd-yoga. However, this is literally interpreted as a ‘sound-current’, and ‘secret mantras’ are used in initiations, which in turn secure a hierarchy of lesser traditions, meditative states
and techniques. Their shift away from the Word back to mantra, elitism, initiation, exclusion and dualism reveals a clear divergence from the GGS, a text the tradition purports to interpret. The GGS’s non-dual, horizontally inclusivist way contrasts sharply with Radhasoami’s literalist, dualistic and hierarchically inclusivist path (Zapart 2020). Unlike particular turn-of-the-twentieth-century movements, such as Nand Singh’s (b. 1869) Nanaksar movement (Doabia 1981; Nesbitt 1985; Singh and Barrier 1996) and Bhai Randhir Singh’s (b. 1878) Akhand Kirtani Jatha (Singh 1971; Singh 1975; Singh 1983; Singh and Barrier 1996) – who evidence aspects of asceticism, celibacy, ritualism, meditation and literalist fundamentalism – their indigeneity marked them from those who migrated to Europe and the United States during the same period, such as, for example, Bhagat Singh Thind (1892–1967), whose entry into the United States moulded him to shift to a more worldly counter-cultural frame. Both of these types of movements, however, emphasised meditation.

Two twentieth-century movements in the west that retain the ‘Zen Mind’ meditation but also develop the postural dimension of the ‘Yoga Body’ are Harbhajan Singh Khalsa’s (Yogi Bhajan’s) Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO) and Professor Surinder Singh’s Raj Academy. Both openly promote yogic techniques, using a vocabulary of yantra, tantra, mudrā and mantra, as well as actual practices including yogic postures (āsana) – the exact vocabulary displaced and dismissed by the GGS. Surinder Singh further summarises his teaching under the phrase ‘naad-yoga’ (yoga of sound), a term also used by others. An alternative yet complementary development to the religious form of ‘Sikh yoga’ is its alignment to the lucrative self-help, New Age spirituality and corporate mindfulness markets. For example, Davinder Singh Panesar’s ‘Gurmat Therapy’ presents a ‘consciousness based psychology’, which is a ‘Psycho-spiritual approach to optimising mental, emotional, physical & transpersonal health and wellness’. ‘Gurmat therapeutic practices, including meditation offer immediate and effective antidotes to stress, anxiety, depression, panic attacks, OCD and other related issues.’ ‘Gurmat therapy is a latest offering of the highly evolved human development and evidence rich systems from India and the Far East particularly Buddhism, Ayurveda, Yoga, Daoism and Zen.’ Under ‘Gurmat Psycho-Spiritual Retreats’ on the main home page (with a two-minute YouTube video linking each retreat to each of the seven chakras tied to a New Age understanding of ‘kundalini yoga’), it claims, ‘These highly practical and experiential retreats are designed to enable participants to understand, recognise and cultivate specific states of being, through awareness development practices and techniques… These retreats have enabled many to awaken.’ Whether or not this is true, is not the point. But whether this is actually gurmat (based on the teachings of GGS) is highly problematic to say the least.

The above movements operate squarely within colonial modernity’s Euro–American frame, which permeates their ethos. This frame, because of its coercive vectors of capitalist power (commodification, consumption, technique-isation, orientalism and individualism), gives such movements little choice but to invent ‘traditions and techniques’. This can be seen in peculiar interpretations of specific lyrics of the GGS by certain groups like the Akhand Kirtani Jatha and contemporary Kirtan Jathas, that form particular techniques of breathing and chanting (of Waheguru) out of them. Such selective and literalist readings tend to ignore the GGS’s emphasis on love and humility as existential modes of being. If the Guru, Word and Name are not particular experiences, but the ground of experience itself, then any experience may trigger that connection. The unavoidable ‘arbitrariness’ this presents is persistently missed by such groups and their misinterpretations. Contrary to the highly selective readings to extract robust techniques (and thus benefit from claims of authenticity and authority), no specific technique or techniques are given in the GGS. That is to say, nothing additional is required to be compassionate, kind, loving, courageous, etc., for it is a matter of application of these common
attributes that we all have, not possessing one technique over others. This is why the gurus switch from the prescription of techniques to the praxis of the way. The way may range from meditation (jog) to singing his praise (bhagati), but these are still not to be made into techniques for ‘without the Name, all would fail’. The inherent deconstructive and existential nature of the Name (as the nameless), Word (as unsystematisable) and Guru (as everywhere there but hidden) will not allow such a reduction to technique that modernity’s individualism demands.

Conclusion

He is not won over by music, (esoteric) sounds or the Vedas.
He is not won over by mindfulness (suratii), gnosis (giaanii) or yoga.

(GGS 1237 Saaranga M1)

In the above hymn Guru Nanak goes on to list other actions and ideals that do not align the individual to the One: ‘feeling sad’, ‘beauty, wealth, pleasures’, ‘being naked’, ‘shrines’, ‘charity’, ‘living alone in the wilderness’, ‘fighting and dying as a warrior’. On the surface this may seem to contradict the earlier emphasis on all manner of quotidian actions being potential pathways to God, the One. However, there is no contradiction, for both lists offer the same conclusion. One must humble the ego-self such that all actions are infused by love and guided by gur-shabad and naam. ‘The true One is won over by becoming the dust of the masses’, that is, ‘only by His Name’. The gurus were acutely aware that they made affirmative suggestions (like meditate on Him, praise Him, remember Him, etc.), and hence also sought to undercut any and all suggestions by emphasising the limitless nature of the Name, Word and Guru. This constant deconstructive critique at the heart of the GGS, one that refuses to be tamed into any kind of salve or technique, is the very antithesis of modern consumerism hungry for the next best technique or system.

Glossary

aap-gavaì, ego-loss; disciplining, decentring, deconditioning the ego-mind
aasan, seat of subjective liberation; inner sovereignty over the ego; posture
dhiaan, meditation as remembrance of the One in the Many
dubidhaa, duality; otherness; forgetting the One, remembering only the many
Gurmukh, S/He who acts with Guru as centre
Guru, human guide; God; natural law; true and only Sovereign
Gur-sikhii, Guru-directed un/learning
haumai, ‘I’ mind; ego; individuation
hukam, will, order, command; natural law; temporality
Ikk-Oankaar, One (before space-time); One as (space–time) Many
jog, psychological and physical techniques assumed to aid liberation
jogii-bhogii, ascetic-sensuality; union of asceticism with worldly pleasures
karam, action; grace
maaiaa, delusion generated by the individuation (haumai); illusion; dualism
man, mind; heart
manmukh, S/He who acts with Ego as centre
mukti, release; enlightenment; inner liberation and outer liberty
Naam, Name of the Nameless, God, The One; the fabric of existence
naam-simaran, constant experiential awareness of the One in the Many; unconscious within conscious
naam-maarag, way of the Name

nadar, grace; favourable glance (of God); ‘Other-power’

niaau, justice; justice as love (never only as law)

raaj-jog, royal-yoga; political mysticism; rule of love as justice

sacaa-patisahah, true sovereign; saint as sovereign

saciaaraa, one who lives truthfully; performs true deeds (i.e. in harmony with hukam)

sahaj, equipoise, effortless, natural, spontaneous (becoming of One in Many)

sant-sipaahii, saint-soldier; love and justice personified

sevaa, devoted care of the other; Selfless love

Shabad, Word; hymn; Word of the Guru; Word as Guru

Sikh, a being devoted to un/learning, listening, loving

Sikhism, Gur-Sikh tradition converted to a ‘religion’

takhat, throne of objective liberty; outer sovereignty of many as part of the One

Notes

1 I would like to thank the editors of this volume, Karen O’Brien-Kop and Suzanne Newcombe, as well as Prabhsharanbir Singh, Puninder Singh, Harjeet Singh and especially Sophie Hawkins for their feedback on earlier versions of this chapter.

2 The Guru Granth Sahib, compiled in 1604, contains the songs of six of the ten Sikh Gurus, all singing and sign in the name of ‘Nanak’: M1 = Guru Nanak (1469–1539), M2 = Guru Angad (1504–1552), M3 = Guru Amar Das (1479–1574), M4 = Guru Ram Das (1534–1581), M5 = Guru Arjan (1563–1606) and M9 = Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621–1675). ‘M’ stands for mahala, the ‘palace of God’s presence’, denoting the Sikh Gurus awakened subjectivity. All translations of the GGS are mine.

3 As part of its engagement with philosophy of language, this chapter employs its own style in capitalizing terms such as ‘True-Guru’ to render notions of universality and truth. Phonetic transliterations are provided in Gurmukhi and Panjabi.

4 Consequently, very few books have been written on the topic; for exceptions see Kohli (1991) and Nayar and Singh (2007). This is understandable given the critiques of yoga in the GGS that centre on egoism: ‘Yogis, householders, pandits, and beggars in religious robes – are all asleep in egotism’ (M3).

5 ‘Without renouncing egotism, how can anyone be a renunciate? Without overcoming the five thieves, how can the mind be subdued? Whoever I see, is diseased: only my True-Guru-Yogi, remains diseaseless’ (GGS 1140 Bhairau M5).

6 Elsewhere (Bhogal 2012a; 2014; 2015), I have argued that gur-sikhii and Gur-Sikh dharam were partially displaced and reframed by British colonisation and classification as a ‘religion’ named ‘Sikhism’. ‘Sikhi(sm)’, on the other hand, is a decolonial moniker devised to foreground this homogenising translation and recall that pre-colonial gur-sikhii was overwritten by Sikhism in the ‘conversion’ to modernity. The parenthetical term ‘Sikhi(sm)’ emphasises the importance of retaining indigenous understandings within modernity and to seek to understand gur-sikhii through its praxis as a verb rather than its conceptual abstraction as a noun. ‘Un/learning’ refers to the fact that knowledge is often instrumentalised by the ego, group or nation, and thus becomes largely an arbitrary if not false projection, one that should be unlearned.

7 GGS 370 Aasaa M5; GGS 877 Raamakalii M1; GGS 3 Japu M1; GGS 942 Raamakalii M1; GGS 114 Maaruu M3.

8 GGS 1156 Bhairau M5; GGS 907 Raamakalii Dakhanii M1; GGS 1026 Maaruu M1; GGS 1087 Maaruu M4.
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9 See Birch’s (2013) historical overview of nāḍa yoga, although it overlooks the Sikh tradition.
10 ‘The King sits on the throne within the self; He Himself administers justice’ (GGS 1092 Maaruu M3).
11 ‘One who sees You is recognised as a householder (gīnasat) and as a renunciate (udaasii)’ (GGS 385 Aasaa M5).
12 ‘He [M4], seated (as King) upon the Throne of Truth, canopy above His Head, possesses the powers of yoga (jog) and the pleasures (of the householder) (bhog)’ (GGS 1406 Savaiie mahale chaute ke Sala).
13 This term is borrowed from Weber (2019); although there is much in common, important differences remain.
14 GGS 662 Dhanaasarii M1.
15 Elsewhere these are expressed as ‘joy and sorrow’, ‘nectar and poison’, ‘honour and dishonour’, ‘beggar and king’. The jiivanmukt – that one liberated in life – ‘amidst all remains unattached’ (GGS 274 Gaurii Sukhamanii M5).
16 ‘Truth is higher than everything; but higher still is truthful living’ (GGS 62 Sirīnaagu M1).
17 ‘God Himself’ is the ‘great sensualist (tasiaa)’, ‘enjoyer (bhogi)’, as well as the ‘yogi (jogii)’ residing in the state of ‘nirvana’ (GGS 1074 Maaruu M5), sitting on the throne of Truth (sachau takhat) (GGS 1406 Savaiie mahale chaute ke Sala). The divine now unites all three spheres of life: private–asceticism, public–civil society, and political–state: God is the greatest king (raaj), yogi (jogii), ascetic (tapiisar) and sensualist (bhogii) (GGS 284 Gaurii sukhamanii M5). Not seeing God within, the deluded mind looks outward, yet ‘He cannot be found by any device (upaai); the Guru will show you the Lord within your heart’ (GGS 234 Gaurii Puurabii M4).
18 ‘When the mind is filthy, everything is filthy; by washing the body, the mind is not cleaned …/ Even if one learns yogic postures of the Siddhas, and holds his senses in check,/ still, the filth of the mind is not removed; the filth of egotism is not eliminated. ||2|| This mind is not controlled by any other discipline, except the Sanctuary of the True-Guru./ Meeting the True-Guru, one is reversed/ transformed beyond description. ||3|| Prays Nanak, one who dies upon meeting the True-Guru, shall be rejuvenated by his Word’ (GGS 558 Vadhansu M3).
19 GGS 234 Gaurii Puurabii M4.
20 Other major Sikh formulations of true yoga are gurmukh-jog and shabad-surat jog.
21 GGS 972 Raamakalii Bhagat Naamdeva jii.
22 GGS 153 Gaurii M1.
23 GGS 359 Aasaa M1; GGS 68 Sirīnaagu M3; GGS 139 Maajha M2.
24 GGS 908 Raamakalii M3.
25 GGS 236 Gaurii M5.
26 GGS 219 Gaurii M9.
27 GGS 513 Giuarii kii vaara M3.
28 GGS 1189–1190 Basantu M1; five thieves of the ego: lust, anger, greed, infatuation and pride.
29 GGS 71 Sirīnaagu M5.
30 GGS 4 Jaapu M1.
31 GGS 3 Jaapu M1.
32 GGS 1240 Saaranga M1.
33 GGS 208 Gaurii M5; five disciples: the five senses and/or five thieves and/or five elements.
34 Shameem Black (Chapter 2 in this volume) notes this term’s politicisation in militant Hindutva discourse.
35 GGS 580 Vadhansu M1.
36 GGS 1039 Maaruu M1.
37 GGS 1026 Maaruu M1.
38 GGS 941 Raamakalii M1.
39 GGS 409 Aasaa Aasaavarii M5.
40 However, the early stages of the reception of yoga in Europe and North America was to demonstrate its health benefits, scientific viability and relevance to modern people. See Gopal Singh Puri (1974) as a case in point, who together with his wife Kailash Kaur Puri taught meditational and postural yoga. Thanks to Suzanne Newcombe for this reference.
41 On 3 August 1857, Frederick Douglass delivered a ‘West India Emancipation’ speech at Canandaigua, New York.
42 Figures like Yogi Adityanath, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, are a far cry from any actual jog, despite being also the head monk/priest at the Gorakhnath Math in Gorakhpur. He is, rather, a crude firebrand
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for far-right Hindutva majoritarian politics, and whose youth organization (Hindu Yuva Vahini) has instigated violence against minority, mainly Muslim, communities. The politicisation of such ‘raaj-yogis’ is not my focus here. And though some may argue that Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was similar (i.e. only political with no saintliness), I offer my rebuttal in Bhogal (2011) and elaboration in Bhogal (2012b). Here raaj-yog cannot be divorced from political violence and terrorism whether state-sponsored or from freedom fighters, for the modern nation-state cannot countenance political theologies of the minorities.

43 GGS 556 Bihaagqara M3.

44 ‘Yoga is not the patched coat [ undergarments], yoga is not the walking stick [ yoga mat]. Yoga is not smearing the body with ashes [ not done in 100 degree Fahrenheit rooms]. Yoga is not the ear-rings [ incense or candles], and not the shaven head [six pack abs or the splits]. Yoga is not the blowing of the horn [ New Age ‘spiritual’ music]. Remaining unperturbed amidst worldly seductions – this is the way to attain yoga’ (GGS 730 Suuhii M1). Such observations can lead to humorous critiques: ‘If yoga could be attained by wandering around naked, then all the deer of the forest would be liberated’ (GGS 324 Gaurii Kabiir jii). The familiarity stems from parallels with nineteenth-century British colonial critique of yogis, internalised by influential Indians (Singleton 2010: chapters 2 and 3).


46 These terms are taken from Thompson in Horton and Harvey (2012). Others have labelled these ‘postural’ (Singleton 2010) and ‘denominational’ (De Michelis 2008) or ‘spiritual’ (Jain 2015). I use ‘Zen Mind’ and ‘Yoga Body’ as monikers denoting large transnational movements (on the one hand, New Thought, Mysticism, Spiritualism, Esotericism, Mantra-Meditation; and on the other, Body Building, Fitness Gym Culture and Modern Postural Yoga, respectively).

47 Deslippe (2012) notes at least eight ‘Punjabi Sikh yoga teachers’ that travelled to the west during the interwar period.

48 For Yogi Bhajan, see Deslippe (2016).

49 GGS 766 Suuhii M1: ‘I know nothing of tantras, mantras and hypocritical rituals; enshrining Ram within my heart, my mind is satisfied. / The ointment of naam is only understood by one who realises sah through gur-sahad’; GGS 184 Gaurii Guaarerii M5: ‘Mantras, tantras, all-curing medicines and acts of atonement, are all in the Name of the Lord ( hari), the Support of the soul and the breadth of life. I have obtained the true wealth of Hari’s love.’

50 I have been engaged in a long, ongoing dialogue about this phrase, which does not occur in the GGS, with leading figures within Sikh musicology: Bhai Baldeep Singh (Chairman of the Anād Foundation, founder of Anād Khaṇḍ: Conservatory of Arts, Aesthetics, Cultural Traditions and Developmental Studies, and Dean of Faculty of Humanities & Religious Studies at Guru Nanak Dev University), as well as, and especially with, Dr. Francesca Cassio (Sardarni Harbans Kaur Chair of Sikh Musicology, Hofstra University), about my concerns along the lines of the argument put forth here.


53 www.davpanesar.com/, accessed 21 June 2020. The explanatory text to the video reads: ‘The first retreat focuses on Sat, the nature of authenticity … The second retreat focuses on Santokh (contentment) … The third and fourth retreats focus on emotional intelligence and emotional wisdom … The fifth retreat focuses on discovering your specific ethical lifestyle … The sixth retreat focuses on awakening spiritual vision … Our final retreat brings together all the elements of the previous retreats to enable participants to combine their experiences and understanding towards self-actualisation, authenticity, creativity and expression. These retreats have enabled hundreds of individuals to discover their personal path to uncover their sacred self.’ Each retreat costs £249; see www.qi-rattan.com/retreats/.

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Bibliography


