‘Seeing’ my Beloved: *Darśan* and the Sikhi perspective

Opinderjit Kaur Takhar

Abstract

The discussion in this chapter focuses on the concept of *darśan* from a Sikh perspective by analysing teachings from the Guru Granth Sahib on the subject of ‘seeing’ the Divine. Sikhi (Sikh teachings) emphasises the Ultimate Divine as formless and experienced through the senses. Indeed, Sikhi refers to this experience as blissful union with one’s Beloved. This chapter explores Sahaj, mystical union with the Divine, through an analysis of teachings around *darśan* in Sikh teachings. Time and time again, the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib allude to the bestowing of Nadar as the opportunity to transcend one’s consciousness from being manmukh (worldly/self-orientated) to gurmukh (attuned to the Divine). To become gurmukh is the concept of an awakened mind; according to Sikhi, a gurmukh is one who has ‘seen’ the formless Divine, one who has ‘heard’ the anahad sabad (the unstruck melody), which suggests a heightening of the senses, an awakening of the man/buddhi.

Keywords: Guru Granth Sahib; Sikh Panth; *darśan*; seeing; Gurdwara; Sants.

Affiliation

University of Wolverhampton, UK.
email: o.takhar@wlv.ac.uk
The crows have searched my skeleton, and eaten all my flesh.
But please do not touch these eyes; I hope to see my Beloved.

(Guru Granth Sahib (GGS), Ang/page 1382)

Sikhi, by which I refer to the teachings primarily contained in the Guru Granth Sahib (GGS), are replete with references to the eyes and for a longing to ‘see’ the Divine, often referred to as the Groom and the Beloved. The term generally used for this ‘vision’ in Indian philosophy is *darśan*, derived from a verb root *dṛś*, ‘to see’, therefore implying a vision of the Divine, and also a vision of Reality. My discussion will focus on the concept of *darśan* from a Sikh perspective. One is inevitably, at this point, faced with the rather large task of providing a definition of Sikh identity which satisfactorily encompasses the diversity within the Sikh Panth (the global community of Sikhs), in terms of both belief and practice. In common to all faiths, Sikh practices too tend to be defined as either mainstream or sectarian. In keeping with current trends around ‘lived religion’, I will address the diversity in terms of the practical application of *darśan* among the wider Sikh community, particularly so in the section dealing with Sants and Babas. A detailed insight into perspectives on Sikh identity can be found in Takhar (2005) and Singh and Barrier (1999). There is an abundance of published work available which focuses on the concept of *darśan* within the Hindu way of life as both an emphasis on ‘seeing and being seen’ by the Divine through *murtis*, images representing the various forms of the Ultimate Brahman, as well as the concept of *darśan* as a ‘vision’ of Reality which is unpacked through the Six Philosophical Schools of Indian Thought, the *Darśanas* (Eck 1998; Flood 1996; Fowler 2016). Indeed, in discussing *darśan*, it has often been stated that ‘[T]he premise in the Hindu religion is that the deity inhabits the statue’ (Rutherford 2000:145). With its emphasis on the transcendent Ultimate Reality, there is no scope in Sikh teachings and philosophy for ‘seeing’ the Divine through *murtis*; quite simply, there are no images of the Divine according to Sikh teachings. Essentially, Sikhi refers to the Divine as gender-free. Nevertheless, in a metaphorical sense, the reference to the Divine as the Groom and to humanity as a whole as the bride is gendered. So, how is the concept of *darśan* to be understood from the Sikh perspective?

I will attempt, in what follows, to make sense of the importance of the sense of sight, of ‘seeing’, in Sikh teachings as embodied in the eternal Guru for the majority of Sikhs – the Guru Granth Sahib. My discussion will also explore the lived aspect of *darśan* for Sikhs in contemporary society.
Any building which houses the Guru Granth Sahib becomes a gurdwara, the Sikh place of worship, literally translated as the ‘door/gateway to the Guru’. Unarguably, gurdwaras are central to Sikh communities, wherever in the world they have settled. The dedication with which gurdwaras are built is indicative of the importance of physically seeing the Guru Granth Sahib, that is having its *darśan*, since it is meditation and contemplation of the teachings which enable the experiential and numinous ‘seeing’ of the Divine. The manner in which the Guru Granth Sahib is treated as the eternal living Guru is notable (see Cole and Sambhi 1995:44–57) in order to understand what Sikhs actually do in their efforts to have *darśan* of the Divine (see Figure 1). The *sangat* or the congregation holds particular importance in Sikh collective worship since this is the environment in which one can be guided by highly respected, spiritual beings. This does not mean, however, that Sikhs are discouraged from quiet individual meditation. *Nam Japna*, meditation on the Name of the Divine is one of the key principles of the Sikh faith. The Guru Granth Sahib uses many Names to refer to the Divine; in popular contemporary practice the Divine is often referred to as *Waheguru*, a name used in the Guru Granth Sahib.

Traditional Indian music, using traditional Indian instruments (particularly the harmonium and tabla) is a fundamental aspect of what Sikhs do.

*Figure 1:* *Kirtan* in a gurdwara. Photograph by Sukhbir Kaur.
Here, the sense of hearing is paramount in the singing of *kirtan*, teachings from the Guru Granth Sahib, and occasionally the Dasam Granth (Figure 1). It is important to note that the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib are written in accordance to *ragas*, musical notes, and are therefore intended to be sung (see Bhogal 2011; Cassio 2012). The role of the *ragi*, one who has taken training in the playing of the harmonium and tabla, therefore is essential in communal worship. The sense of smell, like that in the Greek Orthodox Church (see Lymberopoulou 2018, in the previous issue of this journal), is also enhanced by the burning of incense in most gurdwaras. Accompanying this is the smell of food which wafts into the main worship hall from the kitchen where *langar* is prepared and served all day long. It is an expectation that all who visit the gurdwara, Sikh and non-Sikh, should partake of the *langar* (the vegetarian meal, free to all visitors and worshippers). Gurdwara attendees are also expected to take *karah prasad*, a sweet and warm semolina and butter blessing which emphasises the concept of equality. Sikhs and non-Sikhs attending the gurdwara, thus, both practically and symbolically, enforce the concept of equality by their actions in partaking of the *karah prasad* and the *langar*. The sense of taste is therefore also used in communal worship. Indeed, it is not unusual for gurdwaras to prepare vegetarian pizza and pasta alongside chips for the *langar* in their efforts to attract the younger generation (Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Pizza *langar* at Guru Nanak Gurdwara, Wolverhampton. Photograph by Opinderjit Kaur Takhar.](image-url)
'Seeing’ is ‘knowing’?

Core to the teachings of Sikhi is the concept that ultimate release from the cycle of transmigration is the responsibility of the Divine, Ultimate Reality rather than the individual. The term very often used in the Guru Granth Sahib for what roughly translates as ‘Grace’ is Nadar (which has strong connotations to the term nazar which means ‘sight’ or ‘vision’). One must remember, however, that there are no images of the Divine according to Sikhi, so what exactly does a ‘vision’ entail according to the hermeneutics of the Guru Granth Sahib?

Time and time again, the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib allude to the bestowing of Nadar as the opportunity to transcend one’s consciousness from being manmukh (worldly/self-orientated) to gurmukh (attuned to the Divine). To become gurmukh is the concept of an awakened mind; according to Sikhi, a gurmukh is one who has ‘seen’ the formless Divine, one who has ‘heard’ the anahad sabad (the unstruck melody) which suggests a heightening of the senses, an awakening of the man/buddhi. Importantly, in Indian philosophy overall, the term man has a much wider connotation than simply the ‘mind’: the word lacks a satisfactory translation in English, and can also be associated with the heart, which is further allied with feelings and emotions (McLeod 1996). In verbal discourses of the Guru Granth Sahib, the term buddhi is also often used for both the mind and the conscience. Sikh practice is replete with the singing of the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib, together with the hearing of kirtan, as a practical means towards the calming of the man. The performance of kirtan ‘is an art of spiritual communication’ with the Divine (Singh 2014:397). Guru Arjan Dev clearly links darśan with an awakening of the man:

ਮੇਰਾ ਮਨੁ ਲੋਚੈ ਗੁਰ ਦਰਸਨ ਤਾਈ ॥

My man longs for the Blessed Vision of the Guru’s darśan.

(GGS, Ang 96)

ਹਰਿ ਦਰਸਨਕੰਤ ਮਨੁ ਲੋਚਦਾ ਨਾਨਕ ਪਿਆਸ ਮਨਾ ॥

My man yearns for darśan of the Divine, Nanak, my mind is thirsty.

(GGS, Ang 133)

Therefore, ‘seeing’ according to the Guru Granth Sahib is a realisation, a mystical experience of the acceptance of the immanence of the Divine within each and every human being. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh eloquently equates ‘seeing’ as realisation of the immanent Divine; for her
... dekhai or eyesight is, metaphysically speaking, identical with the category of sujhai – realization or discovery; literally, being endowed with insight into phenomena as they intrinsically are. Senses and rationality are not pitted against each other; on the contrary, they include each other. (1993:21)

The emphasis here is upon ‘love’, a personal relationship with the transcendent Divine through bhakti to a gender-free, formless Ultimate Divine, which must be experienced and realised in order to awaken the conscience into the ideal state of a gurmukh. Nadar, with its synonym darśan, is conceived of as a gift to humanity, an opportunity to experience sahaj, the mystical union with the Divine through Nam Simran which is contemplation and meditation on the Name. An analysis of the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib indicates that sahaj is the resulting mystical experience of receiving darśan (Takhar 2005:43–5), which in turn suggests that sahaj and darśan are coterminous. Darśan is thus the realisation of the Truth, an absence of which brings sadness and suffering. The pursuit to end such suffering became a central concern for Guru Nanak (McLeod 1996:162). The concept of chardi kala among Sikhs refers to ‘high spirits/overcoming anxiety’ and is synonymous with the controlling of the man. Sikh spiritual leaders very often prescribe the hearing of kirtan as the path towards chardi kala and therefore combatting mental illness and depression.

In practice, these teachings are encompassed in the practice of meditation – both on the Name, Nam Japna, as well as in the form of kundalini yoga. The practice of the latter has become visibly present among Sikhs through the efforts of Harbhajan Singh Khalsa, popularly known as Yogi Bhajan. It is through the efforts of Yogi Bhajan in the 1970s onwards in America that the Panth has seen an influx of non-Punjabi Sikhs (Takhar 2005:158–78). There are numerous gurdwaras across the globe offering classes on kundalini yoga. For many Sikhs, the practical aspect of teachings around ‘seeing’ the Divine is through the mystical experience of Union with the immanent Waheguru – an experience derived through such practices as kundalini yoga in which the climax of ‘seeing the truth’ is to open the tenth gate of consciousness. The numinosity and ineffability, to use Rudolf Otto’s terms, of ’seeing’ the Divine transcends the conscience to its highest point, that of the dasam duar, the tenth gate, the highest chakra according to Nath yogic terminology, which is also used by Guru Nanak in his teachings. The point is succinctly illustrated by Hew McLeod:

Ascending to higher and yet higher levels of spiritual perception he [humankind] finally reaches the ultimate, a condition of ineffable union with the Eternal One in which all earthly bonds are dissolved and the cycle of death and rebirth finally brought to an end. (1996:150–1)
Indeed such teachings form the core of kundalini yoga for many Sikhs across the world today. McLeod goes on to state that sahaj is ‘the ineffable radiance beyond the dasam duar’ (1996:225). An ineffable experience can only be understood by those whom have themselves experienced it. Here again we find a connection to the concept of the anahad sabad, the ‘unstruck melody’ which can only be heard by one who has received the Nadar, and therefore a recipient of the daršan of the Divine; indeed an experience that is referred to in the teachings of Guru Nanak and directly linked to his own mystical union in his vision of the Divine. McLeod is of the opinion that sahaj is a ‘word which at once carries us back into Nath theory and beyond the Nath tradition into the earlier world of tantric Buddhism.’ (1996:153)

The term visamad refers to the feeling of being in awe in the presence of the Divine, unarguably the result of having daršan of the Divine through a mystical experience. ‘Seeing’ therefore is the absorption of the man, through Nam Simran, into unity with the Divine, in an inseparable relationship based on utmost love that the bride (symbolising humanity) feels at the ‘sight’ of her Beloved Groom (an allegory for the Divine). The metaphor of a wedding day, in which the bride longs to be united with her Beloved Groom is used on a number of occasions in the Guru Granth Sahib to depict the relationship between humanity and the Divine. The Guru Granth Sahib highlights the ecstatic feelings of the bride when united with her groom; it also illustrates her sorrow and sadness when separated from him. This is a concept that finds expression in the teachings of the Northern Sant tradition and referred to as viraha/birha. Hence meditation on the Name of the Beloved is a remedy for the bride’s longing to ‘see’ her groom:

[T]he practice of nam simaran results in experiences which develop progressively as meditation draws the individual nearer and nearer to God, and which find their ultimate perfection in the final absorption of the man into Him. The experience of visamad is, in this way, both a result of nam simaran and a stimulus to more exalted meditation. (McLeod 1996:219)

In an exploration of the hermeneutics of the Guru Granth Sahib, one finds an inseparable connection between the terms Hukam and Nadar. Hukam is translated as the Will of the Divine, in accordance to which the atman/jiva, the eternal self, is granted birth into the human realm, thus bestowed with the golden opportunity to realise the Divine, to have a vision of Ultimate Reality. Indeed, the gurmukh is characterised by total submission to the Hukam (GGS, Ang 636). According to Gavin Flood, since the root verb for daršan is drš, ‘to see’, the term therefore implies a vision of the world, of Ultimate Reality (1996:224), and this finds a repeated expression in the
teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib. Darśan from the Sikhi perspective therefore is not to be within the gaze of the Divine through puja to a murti, but rather to live in accordance with the Hukam through selfless service, Nam Simran, and a total submission to Ultimate Reality through bhakti. It is thus through Nadar that the experience of ‘meeting’ the Divine through darśan is bestowed upon the gurmukh. Individual effort is paramount in the bestowal of Nadar; darśan of the Divine is therefore the fruit of one’s selfless actions and bhakti through Nam Simran:

ਤੇਰੇ ਦਰਸਨ ਕਉ ਬਲਿਹਾਰਣੈ ਤੁਸਿ ਦਿਤਾ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਨਾਮੁ

I would sacrifice myself for your darśan, you have blessed me with the Ambrosial Name of the Divine. (GGS, Ang 52)

According to Sikh tradition, teachings, or the ‘word’ (bani) concerning the Ultimate Divine and knowledge relating to Reality were revealed to Guru Nanak during a three-day disappearance when he was taken to the ‘court’ of the Divine. This marks the beginning of Nanak’s Guruship, during which he, accompanied by his two closest companions, Mardana and Bala, imparted that divinely received knowledge and wisdom to his followers. It is this ‘seeing’ of the totally formless and transcendent Divine by Guru Nanak which marks the genesis of the Sikh Faith, ‘a vision which formed the foundations of the Sikh religion’ (Kaur Singh 1993:18). Kaur Singh goes on to compare Guru Nanak’s experience with that of Arjuna’s cosmic vision of the Divine in the Bhagavad Gita (1993). Whereas Arjuna’s experience is described as the imparting of knowledge of the infinite forms of the Divine, for Guru Nanak darśan is the experience of Ultimate knowledge by realising the all-pervading nature of Akal Purakh, one of the many names for the Ultimate Divine used in the Guru Granth Sahib. Teachings emphasising the formless nature of the Divine are, therefore, fundamental to Sikh belief. Indeed, the feminine principle in the Sikh vision of the transcendent presents a ‘holistic way of imagining and experiencing sacred power that can itself be a mode of [female] empowerment’ (Kaur Singh 1993:5). Mandair further places emphasis upon the experiential aspect of Ultimate Reality, as something that is ‘experienced all the time, rather than simply comprehended’ (2013:135). Here again the practical application of such teachings is expressed through the practices of Nam Japna and the singing and hearing of kirtan for its aesthetic as well as mystical experience of darśan.

The concept of the unity of the Divine according to Sikhi is one which sees the world, indeed the universe, and every material aspect of creation as existing within the Ultimate Divine. Hence, the Divine is both personal,
and yet also totally transcendent. The Guru Granth Sahib conceptualises
the Divine as nirguna, which essentially alludes to the Divine as being
formless, transcendent and incomprehensible. Nevertheless, one of Sikhi’s
core principles is that of the importance of bhakti as essential in the man’s
longing for darśan. In this respect the Divine becomes saguna, manifest in
creation, so that human beings can experience sahaj, union with the imma-
rent Divine. Those who ignore the initial Nadar, which is the granting of
the human birth, remain on the ignorant level of a manmukh, whereas the
gurmukh is one characterised by the loss of the haumai, the ego, and por-
trays a higher level of consciousness in their daily conduct through the
experience of the darśan of Waheguru:

ਮੋਰੀ ਅਹੰ ਜਾਇ ਦਰਸਨ ਪਾਵਤ ਹੇ ॥

My ego is gone; I have obtained the Blessed Vision of darśan. (GGS, Ang 830)

In this respect, darśan according to Sikhi, is both ‘seeing’ as well as ‘being
seen’ by the Divine (Beckerlegge 2001). Guru Arjan clearly makes the point
that ‘seeing’ is indeed the realisation of the immanent Divine:

ਐ ਹੈ ਦਿਲ ਨਾਕੀ ਦੇਸਤੁ ਪ੍ਰੇਮ ਤੇ ॥

Those eyes which behold darśan are approved and accepted. (GGS, Ang 103)

Nadar, which is also expressed as nazr, ‘vision,’ is thus expressed as
‘Grace’, a gift from the Divine; Nadar is essentially to ‘be seen’ by the Divine
(GGS, Ang 465). ‘Seeing’ is used metaphorically as ‘knowing’; both terms
are fundamentally linked to one another. The Sanskrit translation of the
term darśana, as noted above, alludes to both the Six Schools of Indian
Philosophy (knowledge), as well as a vision of the Divine (sight). Further-
more, ‘the Sanskrit root vid, meaning “to know”, is etymologically related
to the Latin videre = to see, and to the Greek oida = to know ...’ (Kaur Singh
1993:20). For Guru Ram Das, good fortune, which we may interpret as the
bestowal of Nadar, is inextricably linked to good deeds; those individuals
who fail to recognise the Hukam are indeed unfortunate, since darśan is a
vision of Reality for the fortunate to perceive the Truth:

ਬਿਨੁ ਭਾਗਾ ਦਰਸਨ ਨਾ ਥੀਐ ਭਾਗਹੀਣ ਬਹਿ ਰੋਇ ॥

Darśan is unattainable without good fortune, the unfortunate sit and cry. (GGS,
Ang 41)

This would imply that the repudiation of darśan brings misery since the
manmukh remains attached to the temporary lures of the physical world;
the term used for this attachment in the Guru Granth Sahib is maya. Maya
here is not the world-rejecting concept found in the monism of *advaita*; rather Sikhi teaches that the created world is very much real – it is the *karam bhumi*, the action ground, in which the individual transcends, through effort, the conscience to that of the level of the *gurmukh*, at which *darśan* results in the experiencing and realising of the formless Divine:

ਚੈਂਦਰ ਪੁਨੀਤ ਪੇਖਤ ਹੀ ਦਰਸ ॥

My eyes are purified, beholding the Blessed Vision of *darśan*. (GGS, Ang 201)

*Darśan* in popular Sikh practice also refers to the physical act of bowing down, in respect, to the Guru Granth Sahib. This is usually carried out in the gurdwara, where the burning of incense activates the mind in sacred space. In this respect, *darśan* is indeed the vision (knowledge) of the Divine, as encapsulated in the revealed *bani* of the Gurus and the Hindu and Muslim Bhagats whose *bani* is contained in the eternal Guru of the Sikhs. It is useful to repeat here that the term gurdwara translates as the ‘door to the Guru’, that is to the eternal Guru installed within the throne-like structure of the *palki*. A gurdwara is not ‘the house of God’. The very use of the term ‘God’ is problematic in the Sikh context due to its masculine connotations which contradict the gender-free and utterly formless Divine according to the Sikhi perspective.

Returning to the *darśan* of the Guru Granth Sahib, the implications of its online availability deserves a mention. Sikhs go to great lengths to preserve the sanctity of the eternal Guru such as placing it at a higher level, covering it in special cloths (*rumalas*) and other practical measures with underlying symbolic significance which emphasise its status of royalty and hence utmost importance. A tremendous level of care and respect is undertaken by Sikhs to avoid any *beadbi*, disrespect, towards the eternal Guru. But how does this operate in cyberspace? How does one ensure that there is no *beadbi* towards the online Guru? Scheifinger (2008) explores the implications of *darśan* online for Hindus and acknowledges some interesting issues associated with online authority in the Hindu world; however, this is often overlooked in relation to online versions of the Guru Granth Sahib.

**The inseparable relationship between bhakti and darśan**

The human predicament is the *atman’s* (the eternal self/soul’s) entrapment in *samsara*, the cycle of continuous death and rebirth. Such transmigration of the eternal self is the result of attachment to worldly pleasures, as characterised by the predominance of the *haumai*, the ego. As remarked earlier, birth into the human realm is, according to the Guru Granth Sahib, the golden opportunity through which the Divine can be realised through
It is emphasised however, that the human birth is regarded as the highest of all births in Sikhism. It is the human birth alone, through which individual effort is of paramount importance towards mukti, the atman’s release from the cycle of samsara. Since the haumai is the obstacle in Divine realisation, it must be overcome through a personal and loving relationship with the Divine through bhakti. Contemplation on the Name of the Divine, which has become the core foundation of Nam Simran in Sikhi, is a distinguishing pillar of Sikh thought. Hence the path, the marga, of bhakti is placed on a pedestal in Sikh philosophy. However, the final release from samsara is dependent wholly upon the bestowal of Nadar, individual efforts alone cannot guarantee mukti. The manmukh remains alienated from the Divine and chooses not to respond to the bestowal of darśan/Nadar, and hence remains bound to the cycle of samsara.

The path to God involves primarily meditation upon the Name of God, that is Nam Simran. The gurmukh who meditates upon the Nam (Name) stands in opposition to the five vices of kam (lust), krodh (anger), lobh (greed), moh (attachment) and ahankar (pride). Meditation on the Name enables the gurmukh to become detached from the samsaric hold of worldly attachments. The path towards mukti can also be found through Sabad, listening to the words of the Guru Granth Sahib. The concept of Sabad was incorporated into Guru Nanak’s theology from the Northern Sant tradition, to describe the mystical ‘sound’ experienced at the climax of the hatha-yoga technique (McLeod and Schomer 1987:229–50).

What then is the ultimate deciding factor in whether a vision of the Divine is granted? Is it human effort or Divine Grace? Surely, in order for the human birth to be regarded as the golden opportunity to ‘see’ the Divine, effort on the part of the individual is paramount? This dilemma is examined in the context of what is known as the panj khand. This is the transition from the manmukh to the gurmukh via five stages or ‘realms’. The panj khand concept unites both concepts of individual effort and Divine ‘Grace’ in ‘seeing’ and thus realising the Divine through each evolutionary stage in elevating the conscience to the higher level. The first stage is that of Dharam khand, an understanding of the law of cause and effect in the universe both physically and morally. This stage is where the Divine has bestowed Nadar on the atman to be reborn into the human realm. The next khand is that of Gian, translated as the realm of knowledge (gian is synonymous with the term jnana in a dualistic understanding of Reality) in the sense that it widens an individual’s spiritual consciousness. It is in this realm that one’s haumai is overcome as a result of acknowledging the Hukam. The third stage in the progression of elevated consciousness is that
of Saram khand – the realm of effort. This inevitably is the stage of selfless actions and utmost devotion to the Divine as a result of the vision of the Divine through darśan. The next evolutionary stage is that of Karam khand, the realm of Ultimate Nadar. The ultimate goal of Sikhi is to enter the final and fifth realm of Truth, Sach khand. This is the realm of the jivan-mukt, the one whose atman has united with the Divine. Importantly, this five-stage transition is based on the concept of dualism, where the Divine is always over and above all that has been created.

**Darśan of Sants and Babas**

The term Sant, used interchangeably with Baba in a Punjabi context, refers to a person of spiritual piety, and bears similarity to the concept and role of a Saint in popular usage. The role of the Sant and/or Baba is becoming increasingly important in contemporary Sikh practice in relation to the concept of darśan. Living Sants and Babas are becoming the channels through which many Sikhs perceive darśan very much in the context of seeing and being seen (Eck 1998:3). Followers of such Sants and Babas flock in their masses to have darśan, ‘to see’ these perceived personifications of elevated conscience, very often conceived of as possessing divinity themselves in the eyes of their followers. It would thus not be incorrect to label many of these followers as the devotees of such individuals whom are believed to have powers to bestow darśan on their followers (Cox and Robinson 2006). Although Sikhi is generally cautious about such elevated individuals, many Sants and Babas in the Sikh context have become rather renowned for a ‘back to Sikhi’ approach, as Tatla highlights:

> Among the factors which have sustained the religious and cultural orientation of Sikhs in Britain, the role of the visiting Sants is of crucial importance. Sants have shaped the lives of many of their Sikh disciples directly, inspiring others to uphold the religious ideals, and have contributed in several ways to the community’s causes and institutions (1992:349).

Diversity among the Sikhs in relation to Sant-orientated groups have been discussed in Takhar (2005). Of particular importance here are the Namdharis and the followers of the Sants of the Nishkam Sewak Jatha. The former are often regarded as heretics by the Panth (global Sikh community) since they explicitly refer to their leaders as Gurus, in continuation of the line of Sikh human Gurus, thus rejecting the fundamental Sikh belief in the Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal Guru of the Sikhs, as proclaimed by Guru Gobind Singh in 1708 BCE. Takhar (2005:59–88) provides a detailed discussion of the Namdhari rejection of the Adi Granth as the eternal
Guru of the Sikhs. Namdharis do not place the Adi Granth in the *palki*, and *darśan* in their places of worship, referred to as *bhawans*, revolves around a photograph of the present living Guru in his physical absence. The Namdhari Guru is believed to possess divine powers to bestow *darśan* on his followers. His visit to Britain, for example, is a time for British Namdharis to assemble en masse in order to have ‘sight’ of him and thus receive his blessing (Takhar 2014:354–6).

The leaders of the Nishkam Sewak Jatha are referred to as Sants and Babas rather than Gurus. In this respect the Nishkam Sewak Jatha and its followers are readily accepted as Sikhs within the Panth at large, due to the fact that they revere the Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal Guru and place great emphasis on becoming initiated into the Khalsa fold. However, the position of their Sants and Babas, among followers, is an indication of their belief that *darśan* of the present living Baba, Mohinder Singh, is akin to being bestowed with Divine blessings (see Takhar 2005:38–58).

Both Baba Mohinder Singh, as well as the Namdhari Guru, Udhay Singh, are able to physically see and touch their followers, and they are believed to be, in the eyes of their followers, direct pathways to the Divine. In this respect, the senses of touch and sight both become relevant in the bestowal of *darśan* in the contemporary sense of living Gurus, Sants and Babas (Eck 1998:9). Cox and Robinson’s (2006) detailed study of the Sachkand Nanak Dham Sants, as well as Nesbitt’s research on the Nanaksar Sants (1985) also observe such veneration of living spiritual leaders by their devotees and followers. Juergensmeyer, through his work on the Radhasoami Sants, the followers/adherents of whom float on the fuzzy boundaries between Punjabi Hindu and Sikh identity, succinctly states that:

> [a]mong village followers of the movement especially, the sacred sight (*darśan*) of the living Master has powerful, even healing qualities. I have seen mothers rush to hold up their sick children as the automobile of the present Master ... hurries past .... (1987:342).

The concept of *darśan* thus remains pivotal in many Indian traditions which may not sit neatly within the boundary of either being Hindu or Sikh, a further example of which is the Wolverhampton-based *Ek Niwas* following of Baba Balaknath (see Takhar and Jacobs 2011). LaBrack’s observation of the veneration of Sikhs towards living Sants in America is easily transferable to beliefs among Sikhs on a global level. He states:

> [T]he presence of a Sant is in itself edifying and a spiritual boost to the community. The ideas and concepts associated with *darśan* are still very much alive, even among second-generation American-born Punjabi Sikh children .... (1987:266).
He also makes the point, however, that such veneration is not supported in the teachings of Sikhi (LaBrack 1987:268).

In conclusion, Sikhi – that is the body of teachings primarily from the Guru Granth Sahib – acknowledges that ‘seeing’ the formless, incomprehensible Divine involves utmost acceptance of the Divine Will, the Hukam. A prerequisite to such knowledge is the abandonment of the ego, the haumai. With its etymology in the Sanskrit root drś (to see/vision), darśan in its relation to a ‘sight and seeing’ is the sense that is discussed at length in the Indian religions, particularly Hindu and Sikh, and all those that fall within the blurred boundaries which lie between the two. So how does ‘seeing’ the divine through a murti compare with the seeing of the Divine according to Sikhi? For the latter, there are numerous teachings in the Guru Granth Sahib which imply that darśan is the ‘experiencing’ of the immanence of the Divine, ‘seeing’ the self in relation to Ultimate Reality, where sight is used as a metaphor for the experience of sahaj. The practical steps towards sahaj and thus darśan of the Divine is through practices such as keeping the company of the sangat, the singing and hearing of kirtan, and individual as well as communal meditation in the form of Nam Japna and physical yoga. Sikh sectarian movements with living Sants, Babas and Gurus have their own unique practices associated with the concept of darśan, the most prominent of which are the seeking of blessings from the revered spiritual leader.

Notes
1 References in the Gurmukhi font have been accessed from the SriGranth Online Resource developed by Punjabi University Patiala. Retrieved on 13 June 2017 from http://www.srigranth.org.
2 The term Adi Granth was used for the Sikh scripture when it was compiled by the fifth Guru Arjan in 1603–4. In 1708, according to popular Sikh belief, it became the eternal Guru for the Sikhs, hence the term Guru Granth Sahib was used. Because the Namdharis deny this belief, they do not acknowledge the Adi Granth as the eternal Guru.
3 The fuzzy boundaries between Hindu, Sufi and Sikh Identity is particularly relevant to the Sindhi community. See Ramey (2008).

About the author
Opinderjit Kaur Takhar is director of the Centre for Sikh and Panjabi Studies at the University of Wolverhampton, UK, and also senior lecturer and head of religious studies there. Takhar’s academic research is focused around Sikh, Dalit and Punjab studies, and she teaches modules on Indian religions and the philosophy of religion. She has written extensively on matters and issues in relation to British Sikhs, caste and gender and is also the author of Sikh Identity: An Exploration of Groups among Sikhs (Ashgate, 2005).
which is used as a key text on Sikh identity in universities across the world. She is also an editorial board member of the peer-reviewed journal *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, and is guest editor (along with Surinder S. Jodhka and Hugo Gorringe) of the special issue on caste of the *Journal of Contemporary South Asia* (2017).

**References**


