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Review

The Socially Involved Renunciate: Guru Nānak's Discourse to the Nāth Yogis, by Kamala Elizabeth Nayar and Jaswinder Singh Sandhu. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007. xvi + 181 pp., $60 (hb), $18.95 (pb). ISBN-13 978-0-7914-7213-2 (hb), ISBN-13 978-0-7914-7214-9 (pb; June 2008).

Given the comparative paucity of literature on the Sikh tradition, the publication of a new book, especially one as insightful and accessible as this, is particularly to be welcomed. It explores the theme of renunciation through an examination of *Siddh Goṣṭ*, a dialogue between Guru Nānak and Nāth yogis, including a translation of the text.

Siddh Goṣṭ is introduced in six chapters. The first takes as its main theme the question of liberation, stressing that it was in *Siddh Goṣṭ* that Guru Nānak denounced renunciation as neither spiritually vital nor valid. Here, too, there is a discussion of methodology in which the authors seek to position themselves between traditional and critical scholarship, even if the representation of critical scholarship sometimes tends to the stereotypical, perhaps due to the brevity of this section. Notwithstanding, their observations on the need for a balanced approach in which history, hitherto the dominant methodology, is supplemented by theological and spiritual concerns are pertinent. The second chapter concentrates upon the Nāths and *hath-yoga*. If anything, this excellent account could have been longer since the Nāth yogis of *Siddh Goṣṭ* ask Guru Nānak questions that he answers rather than acting as equal partners in a dialogue. The third chapter examines the life of Guru Nānak, making effective use of a variety of sources, including hagiographical literature, to analyse references to Nānak's meetings with Nāth yogis in order to suggest a date for the composition of *Siddh Goṣṭ* (during the latter period of the Nānak's life) and clarify the synthetic nature of the text (drawing upon different discourses with the Nāths). The fourth chapter explores a range of textual issues, among them an examination of the genre in which *Siddh Goṣṭ* is written. It is perhaps more difficult to assess some of the technical aspects of the discussion given the concise treatment afforded them, though the authors' arguments are persuasive and their conclusions plausible. The fifth chapter gives an overview of Guru Nānak's message, quoting from *Siddh Goṣṭ* and other hymns to exemplify the beliefs and practices Nānak taught. The final chapter returns to the question of renunciation as central to *Siddh Goṣṭ* and, through a close reading of the text again in the wider context of Guru Nānak's works, delineates Nānak's distinctive resolution of renunciation with life in the world—self-renunciation combined with social involvement.

The translation of *Siddh Goṣṭ* follows. This is commendably free from Christian phraseology as well as being easy to read. Its readability is facilitated by sensitivity to the literary quality of the English version and by presenting the verses under thematic headings. The decision to retain Sikh terms rather than providing English equivalents serves the clarity of the translation by avoiding conceptual confusion. Nor is this clarity achieved at the cost of readability because a glossary of Punjabi terms is provided.

Throughout, the authors make a strong case for the significance of *Siddh Goṣṭ*, featuring as it does not only in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, the primary Sikh scripture, but also in the *Pañj Granthī*, hymns chosen for daily recitation. Moreover, as a philosophical work, *Siddh Goṣṭ* is shown to expound ' "True" Yoga' (p. 64). It is this concept that reveals what Guru Nānak understood by renunciation, that is, 'meditative remembrance of the Divine Name (*nām-simraṇ*) while at the same time taking to selfless service (*sevā*) in the pursuit of liberation' (p. 99). In expounding this *yoga*, the authors demonstrate that Guru Nānak reinterpreted Nāth terminology associated with Nāth belief and practice, notably *hath-yoga.* They argue, for example, that Guru Nānak's view of *śabad* (word) was indebted to the Nāth concept of *anāhat-nād* (unstruck sound) though, whereas the Nāths sought to experience this through *hath-yoga*, Guru Nānak insisted that it could be experienced only through *nām* (name).

In so doing, the authors shed some new light on a controversial area, the influence of the Sant tradition on Sikhism, by focusing on the *hath-yoga* of the Nāths, an integral part of the Sant synthesis. It is observed that, if in general the role of the Sant tradition in the development of Sikhism has won wide acceptance, the particular contribution of the world-renouncing Nāth yogis has been challenged by characterizing Sikhism as based on the lifestyle of the householder. Indeed, one of the most innovative aspects of the book is the way in which it challenges the conventional claim that Sikhism is a 'householder religion' (p. 6). The authors propose a fourfold typology of Indian religious lifestyles: 'a householder living in society'; 'a householder living in the larger context of eventual withdrawal from society'; 'a renunciate living outside society'; and 'a renunciate living in the larger context of involvement in society' (p. 5). Sikhism is located in the last category, a position that, the authors emphasize, distinguishes it from renunciation of the world as the path to liberation and from both householder lifestyles. These points are illustrated and substantiated by reference to *Siddh Goṣṭ* where Guru Nānak deploys a Nāth vocabulary to set forth his goal of a renunciation that does not entail a rejection of society, thereby describing the ideal of the 'socially involved renunciate' (p. 113) of the book's title. Hence the book redresses an imbalance in treatments of Sikhism by paying proper attention to the importance of the Nāths on its emergence.

This book will be particularly useful for undergraduates studying Sikhism. In introducing *Siddh Goṣṭ,* the authors also give an introduction to the teaching of Guru Nānak in relation to the contemporary religious scene. Perhaps on these grounds, the authors are justified in suggesting that *Siddh Goṣṭ* 'makes a very fitting counterpart to the Hindu *Bhagavad Gītā* and Buddhist *Dhammapada* for introductory courses on Indian religions' whatever misgivings there may be regarding the notion of a 'suitable single text' (p. xii) for any tradition. Certainly, this book is to be recommended to students and lecturers alike, though possibly the former will most appreciate its general aspects as an interesting and informative way into Sikhism and the latter its exposition of an often neglected dimension of Guru Nānak's ministry.

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