

## Chapter One

# The Quest for Liberation in Indian Religions

*Siddh Goṣṭ* is comprised of a discourse between Guru Nānak (1469–1539 CE)—the first of the ten human gurus<sup>1</sup> of the Sikh religion—and a group of Nāth yogis or ascetics (*siddhas*)<sup>2</sup> associated with Śaiva heterodoxy in the northern region of the Indian subcontinent. The *Siddh Goṣṭ* discourse addresses the popular yet contentious issue of whether or not renouncing mundane existence is necessary for the attainment of liberation (*mokṣa*). The question on renunciation as a prerequisite to escape from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) is a prominent theme within the four major religions originating in the Indian subcontinent—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism.

There are disparate religious paths toward liberation in the development of Indian religions. Even though the unifying concept among the four Indian religions is *saṃsāra* and liberation is viewed as some form of escape from this cycle, the manner in which it is to be sought is variously defined. The different religious paths advocated by the Indian religions reflect contradictory perspectives on “living-in-this-world” and “renouncing-this-world” in the pursuit of the ultimate religious goal of *mokṣa*.

Within the Śaiva stream of Hinduism, the tension between “living-in-this-world” and “renouncing-this-world” is vividly expressed through the ambivalent mythological and iconographical depictions of the Hindu god Śiva. The myths surrounding Śiva portray him sometimes as a householder accompanied by his consort Pārvatī and at other times as an ascetic. According to Wendy Doniger, the erotic and ascetic depictions of Śiva are not diametrically in opposition to each other. In actuality, the images reflect the tension between the householder and the renunciate lifestyle models, with Śiva being the mediating principle: “among ascetics Śiva is a libertine and among libertines he is an ascetic.”<sup>3</sup> The disparate depictions of Śiva, no doubt, reflect the tension that exists between the domestic and ascetic ideals in the pursuit of the ultimate religious goal of liberation from *saṃsāra*.

In contrast to the common religious traditions of asceticism and renunciation found in Hinduism,<sup>4</sup> Buddhism and Jainism, Sikhism (the most recent of the four) holds a definite and uniform position against the path of renunciation as a valid means to liberation. Sikh literature, such as *Siddh Goṣṭ*, advocates the path of devotion while “living-in-this-world.” Not only does *Siddh Goṣṭ* teach that one should live in the world, but it does so in the specific context of Guru Nānak’s disapproval of asceticism as practiced by the Nāth yogis.

Before analyzing the *Siddh Goṣṭ* text and its attitude toward renunciation, it is necessary to look first at the divergent Indian religious perspectives on the paths advocated in pursuit of the common goal of liberation. An examination of these disparate perspectives on domesticity and renunciation among the Indian religions will not only provide the background from which Sikhism emerged and evolved but also, more specifically, contextualize the discourse Guru Nānak had with the Nāth yogis.

#### DOMESTICITY OR ASCETICISM?

Scholarship on Indian religions often discusses the issue surrounding the prerequisites for attaining liberation (*mokṣa*) from the cycle of rebirth in terms of two polarities, the religious paths of: (1) “living-in-this-world” and (2) “renouncing-this-world.”<sup>5</sup> The issue surrounding domesticity and asceticism is manifest in all four of the major Indian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism). While the more ancient traditions tend to embrace asceticism, the later traditions seem to place greater importance on devotionism meant for the layperson.

From the standpoint of the development of Indian religions, four main categories can be delineated in order to highlight the nuances of the religious lifestyles pertaining to the various traditions’ particular theological orientation and practical pursuit of liberation. The four categories of the ideal religious lifestyle types (see fig. 1) are: (1) a householder living in society, (2) a renunciate living outside society, (3) a householder living in the larger context of eventual withdrawal from society, and (4) a renunciate living in the larger context of involvement in society.

The four religious lifestyle types can be understood along two axes. The first axis is concerned with the type of religious persons, which is directly related to the religious goals being pursued. The two types of religious person are (1) the householder oriented toward the acquisition of worldly or material goals, and (2) the renunciate ori-

ented toward spiritual realization. The second axis pertains to the religious person’s living situation or dwelling place, which is closely linked to eligibility for the attainment of spiritual goals. The two types of environments for religious pursuits are: (1) living in society whereby religious goals are attainable by all, and (2) living outside society, whereby liberation is achievable only by a certain elite group based on status, whether by ascription or achievement.

RELIGIOUS PERSON TYPE:

HOUSEHOLDER

DWELLING PLACE:  IN SOCIETY	A HOUSEHOLDER LIVING IN SOCIETY  (Brāhmaṇism)	A HOUSEHOLDER LIVING IN THE LARGER CONTEXT OF EVENTUAL WITHDRAWAL FROM SOCIETY  (Classical Hinduism)	DWELLING PLACE:  OUTSIDE SOCIETY
	A RENUNCIATE LIVING IN THE LARGER CONTEXT OF INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIETY  (Mahāyāna Buddhism, Bhakti, Sikhism)	A RENUNCIATE LIVING OUTSIDE SOCIETY  (Upaniṣad tradition, Theravāda Buddhism, Jainism)	

RELIGIOUS PERSON TYPE:

RENUNCIATE

Figure 1. Ideal Religious Lifestyles Among the Indian Religions

These four types not only broadly distinguish the nuances of the various religious lifestyles evident in Indian religions at large, but they can also be used as an aid to understand the development of Indian religions. That is, in the evolution of Indian religions, there has been a move away from the more traditional or ancient polarities of the domestic and ascetic ideals toward more integrative ones, like the categories of the “householder living in the larger context of eventual withdrawal from society” and the “renunciate living in the larger context of involvement in society.”

This typology of the four ideal religious lifestyles emerged in the process of research for the present work on *Siddh Goṣṭī*, in order to demonstrate Guru Nānak’s precise stance, theological orientation and arguments concerning the attainment of liberation. Sikhism is often described as a “householder religion”<sup>6</sup> because of its explicit rejection of renunciation and asceticism. However, as this work demonstrates, Guru Nānak actually denounces the first three types of religious lifestyles—including the traditional householder path—even as he uses Nāth “ascetic” or “yogic” terminology to illustrate his devotional path while “living-in-this-world.” An elaboration of the four types of religious lifestyles in the light of the development of the four major Indian religions is essential to understanding Guru Nānak’s Sikh philosophy.

#### *The Householder Living in Society*

The *householder living in society* represents the one “living-in-this-world,” whose path entails the fulfillment of social duty and the performance of rituals for the attainment of material goals both for the present life and the afterlife in heaven. The foremost and earliest example of domesticity as a religious path is the one promulgated by the Vedas (ca. 1500 BCE), often referred to as Brāhmaṇism.<sup>7</sup> Action is of primary importance because it results in the accumulation of merit. The boons that are sought, many of which are materialistic, pertain to good fortune, enjoyment, longevity, and the like for those who are very much living in the mundane world:

Whoso, for righteous life, pours offerings to you, O Heaven and Earth, Ye Hemispheres that man succeeds; He in his seed is born again and spreads by Law: from you flow things diverse in form, but ruled alike . . .

May Heaven and Earth make food swell plenteously for us, all-knowing father, mother, wondrous in their works. Pour-

ing out bounties, may in union, both the worlds all beneficial,  
send us gain, and power and wealth. (*R̥gVeda* 6.70.3, 6)<sup>8</sup>

Vedic rituals (*dharma*) are to be performed in the presence of the married couple of the household seeking boons in this life, in heaven (*svarga*), or both.

Even though the Vedas are venerated as “Hindu scripture” in terms of the development of Hindu religion, many scholars have debated on the actual influence of the Vedas.<sup>9</sup> Vedic practices and mythology are considered to have been influential on later Hindu ritualism. In fact, the Vedic path of religious and social action toward materialistic goals became an integral part of the classical Hindu orientation of the *householder living in the larger context of eventual withdrawal from society*.

#### *The Renunciate Living Outside Society*

The category of the *renunciate living outside society* represents the one who, “renouncing-this-world,” is either a wandering hermit or lives in a monastic community in order to subdue or conquer desire and thus attain spiritual wisdom and, ultimately, liberation. In doing so, it is common practice for a renunciate to take a vow of celibacy (that is, not to engage in sexual activity, which also means not to get married nor have any progeny), pursue a life of asceticism, study rigorously, and perform meditation. The prime examples of the *renunciate living outside society* are found in the late Vedic period (900–500 BCE), during which there emerged three important religious streams that regard total renunciation as the sole means toward liberation—the Upaniṣadic, the Buddhist, and the Jain traditions.

In reaction to Vedic ritualism and the futility of the materialistic goal-orientation of Vedic practice, including the pursuit of heaven (*svarga*), the Upaniṣadic, the Buddhist, and the Jain traditions ideally upheld the new and distinct worldview of *saṃsāra*, wherein one ought to renounce worldly affairs in the pursuit of liberation from the web of rebirth. Attachment and the desire to accumulate good “action” or “merit” (*karma*) attained both in one’s previous and present life are taken to condition the circumstances of one’s future life. Attachment is viewed as the underlying source of all suffering, including attachment to the notion of a better rebirth.

The Upaniṣadic challenge (ca. 900–500 BCE) to Vedic ritualism (even though there are also mythic and ritual passages in the Upaniṣads)<sup>10</sup> calls for a new quest for spiritual knowledge *jñāna*—the

metaphysical understanding of the true nature of Reality—necessary for escape from the cycle of rebirth. This new metaphysical orientation views Vedic rituals and their materialistic goals as both an inferior and an ineffective means to liberation:

Thinking sacrifice and merit is the chiefest thing, naught better do they know—deluded! Having had enjoyment on the top of heaven won by good works, they re-enter this world, or a lower. (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.10)<sup>11</sup>

Rather, the Upaniṣadic path calls for the renunciation of the material world in the pursuit of “higher” wisdom:

The one who practice austerity (*tapas*) and faith (*śraddhā*) in the forest, the peaceful (*śānta*) knowers who live on alms, depart passionless (*vi-rāga*) through the door of the sun, to where is that immortal Person (*puruṣa*), e’en the imperishable Spirit (*ātman*).

For the sake of knowledge . . . let him go, full in hand, to a spiritual teacher (*guru*) who is learned in the scriptures and established on Brahman. (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.11–12)

The escape from the cycle of rebirth is ultimately achievable only by a rigorous and austere path of study and meditation. In the pursuit of knowledge (*jñāna*) of the true nature of Reality, one must take on a path of renunciation in order to eliminate all passion and desire. This wisdom ultimately leads to the realization of the equation of the Supreme Essence (referred to as Brahman) with *ātman*. The goal of liberation, however, is attainable only by the privileged males belonging to the three upper classes (*dvija*), based on the strict rule that Vedic learning and the attainment of wisdom is accessible only to them. Indeed, *mokṣa* is achievable only by a small elite group, based on the ascriptive status of male gender among the three higher Hindu classes (*brahmin*, *kṣatriya*, and *vaiśya*).

In a similar fashion, the founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha (ca. 624–544 BCE), is said to have renounced his royal family life and taken on ascetic practices in the pursuit of enlightenment on seeing the “four” miseries—an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and an ascetic.<sup>12</sup> In his challenge to Vedic ritualism and in his recognition of the Four Noble Truths,<sup>13</sup> the Buddha advocated the Eightfold Path as the renunciate path to liberation from the cycle of rebirth.<sup>14</sup> Through the controlling of all of one’s desires and the perfecting of one’s actions,

one becomes aware of impermanence, including the experience of the insubstantiality of the personal self (*anatta* in Pali for *anātman*).

The *arhant* (“noble one”; Buddha-like) is the enlightened one, who will have no rebirth as he or she no longer desires anything, not even the pleasures of meditation. However, according to the Buddha, it does not suffice to simply wander as an ascetic in the forest in quest of liberation:

Many for refuge go  
To mountains and to forests,  
To shrines that are groves or trees—  
Humans who are threatened by fear.

This is not a refuge secure,  
This refuge is not the highest.  
Having come to this refuge,  
One is not released from all misery.  
(*Dhammapada* 14. 188–89)<sup>15</sup>

Rather, the act of taking refuge in the three jewels (*triratna*)—Buddha, *dharma* (*dhamma* in Pali), and *saṃgha* (“community”; *saṅgha* in Pali)—is the only valid means to the ultimate goal of escape from the cycle of rebirth:

But who to the Buddha, Dhamma,  
And Sangha as refuge has gone,  
Sees with full insight  
The Four Noble Truths . . .

This, indeed, is a refuge secure.  
This is the highest refuge.  
Having come to this refuge,  
One is released from all misery.  
(*Dhammapada* 14. 190, 192)

The *saṃgha* of *bhikṣus* (“monks,” literally “beggars”; *bhikkhu* in Pali) and *bhikṣuṇīs* (“female monks”; *bhikkhunī* in Pali) is the community of renunciates, who have relinquished worldly affairs, including family, in the pursuit of liberation. To become a realized person (*arhant*) is the goal, and it is achievable only by formally ordained monks and nuns who have renounced worldly life, symbolized by shaved heads, loose clothing and a begging bowl:

A monk chooses a remote lodging in a forest, at the foot of a tree, on a mountain slope, in a wilderness, in a hill-cave, in a cemetery, in a forest haunt, in open or a heap of straw. Returning from alms-gathering after the meal he sits down cross-legged, holding the back erect, having made mindfulness rise up in front of him. He, by getting rid of covering, he purifies the mind of coveting. (*Majjhima-nikāya*, pp. 328–29)<sup>16</sup>

Notwithstanding the superior status and the greater privilege that the monks have as compared to the nuns in the Theravāda tradition, the *saṃgha* path outlined by the Buddha is open to all, regardless of caste, class, or gender. As against the renunciates, the laypeople, those who do not take to the path of renunciation, are believed to suffer through future rebirths until they become an *arhant*.

Like the Buddha, Mahāvīra (540–468 BCE),<sup>17</sup> the revered founder of Jainism, also taught that one has to completely renounce domestic life for spiritual attainment. Indeed, only through renunciation from mundane existence can liberation be attained:

... What you acknowledge as sagedom, that you acknowledge as righteousness. It is inconsistent with weak, sinning sensual, ill-conducted house-inhabiting men. 'A sage, acquiring sagedom, should subdue his body.' 'The heroes who look at everything with indifference, use mean and rough' ... Such a man is said to have crossed the flood (of *saṃsāra*), to be a sage, to have passed over (*saṃsāra*) to be liberated, to have ceased. Thus I say. (*Ācārāṅga Sūtra* 47)<sup>18</sup>

Renunciation is seen as a prerequisite for liberation of the soul, because worldly affairs are viewed as binding one to the cycle of rebirth. Furthermore, renunciation decreases external stimulation, making for a suitable tranquil environment for the soul. For that reason, there is great emphasis on cutting oneself off from the everyday world by living in the wilderness in small groups or in relative solitude in order to meditate and contemplate on the nature of the world.

The Jain path of renunciation is a gradual one, as is Buddhism and the Upaniṣadic tradition, because it can take many lifetimes before one actually attains *nirvāṇa*. The path is one of absolute self-discipline, during which the three jewels (right insight, right knowledge, and right conduct) and five practices (nonviolence, truthfulness, nonstealing, sexual purity, and nonpossession) lead one toward perfection. One is asked to attain self-control (in contrast to the utterances



of the Vedic priests) through rigorous study and meditation in order to achieve liberation. There are also more extreme practices to cultivate self-reliance and self-discipline that require Jain monks and nuns to undertake acts of self-deprivation (such as starving oneself) and self-mortification (such as beating oneself). Although there is great emphasis on formal monastic renunciation for the devout, there also exist at the same time the mass of Jain laypeople, who venerate the twenty-four perfected beings (*jinas*) and accept the three jewels, but follow the five practices in varying measure in the belief that liberation will eventually occur after many rebirths.<sup>19</sup>

There are likewise various yogic traditions like the Nāth sect that flourished later during the twelfth to thirteenth century CE, which have been influenced by the more ancient Indian traditions of asceticism. The Nāth tradition will be specifically discussed in chapter 2.

*The Householder Living in the Larger Context of Eventual Withdrawal from Society*

The category of the *householder living in the larger context of eventual withdrawal from society* refers to the path that synthesizes domesticity and asceticism. It includes the fulfillment of one's social and religious duty for material goals, but places these goals within the larger context of eventual "renunciation-of-this-world" for liberation. However, such liberation is attainable only by a certain elite group based on ascriptive status. The paramount example of this category is Classical Hindu belief and practice,<sup>20</sup> wherein there is an earnest attempt to synthesize the earlier Vedic path of religious and social action with the opposing austere Upaniṣadic path of renunciation open only to the privileged males belonging to the three upper-Hindu classes (*dvija*).

In the *Bhagavad Gītā* (ca. 100 BCE–100 CE),<sup>21</sup> Kṛṣṇa outlines three different religious paths: *jñāna-yoga* (discipline of wisdom), *karma-yoga* (discipline of action), and *bhakti-yoga* (discipline of devotion). Although Kṛṣṇa discusses these three paths, his teaching of the renunciation of the fruits of one's actions (*niṣ-kāmā-karma-yoga*) is of central importance.

The man who acts, having rendered his actions to Brahman and abandoned attachment is untainted by evil, in the same way that a lotus leaf is untainted by (muddy-) water.

The disciplined man, having abandoned the result of action, attains complete peace; the undisciplined man, whose action is impelled by desire, and who is attached to the result, is bound. (*Bhagavad Gītā* 5.10.12)<sup>22</sup>

The *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches that one has to fulfill social and religious duty at the personal level for the sake of attaining *mokṣa* and for the maintenance of the social order at the community level. While one may live in the world as a householder, it is with the ultimate goal or aim of renouncing the fruits of one's actions.

At first blush *niṣ-kāma-karma-yoga* would seemingly fall into the fourth category "renunciate living in the larger context of involvement in society." In the case of the medieval Bhakti and modern interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gītā* it could.<sup>23</sup> However, during the period of classical Hinduism, the pan-Indian socioreligious law books outlined schemas that differentiated four stages of life with distinct goals. That is, it prescribes different stages in life for the action-oriented path of "living-in-this-world" with the fulfillment of material goals and the path of "renouncing-this-world" for self-realization. During the second quarter of one's life, one has prescribed social or religious obligations to fulfill materialistic goals, while during the last quarter of life one ought to renounce the material world in order to pursue the ultimate goal of *mokṣa* (*saṁnyāsa-āśrama*).

According to the socioreligious law books—like the *Dharmaśāstras* (ca. 200 BCE) and *Manusmṛti* (ca. 200 BCE–100 CE)—there are four aims of life corresponding to one's stage in life (*āśrama*),<sup>24</sup> that is, in turn, determined by one's class (*varṇa*)<sup>25</sup> and gender. The four aims of life include the performance of social and religious duty (*dharma*), the acquisition of wealth and prosperity (*artha*), the experience of sensual pleasures (*kāma*), and the attainment of liberation (*mokṣa*). While there are four aims of life, it is the first three (*dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma*) that are to be fulfilled during the second quarter of life or the householder stage (*gṛhastha-āśrama*).

A twice-born one shall reside for the first quarter of his life in the residence of his preceptor, and the second quarter (thereof) in his own house as a married man. (*Manusmṛti* 4.1)<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile the fourth aim—*mokṣa*—is meant to be pursued in the last stage of life called the *saṁnyāsa-āśrama*. The males of the three higher classes, referred to as "twice-born" (*dvija*), having received Vedic learning during the first quarter of life (*brāhmaṇa-āśrama*), ought to renounce mundane existence in the pursuit of liberation during the *saṁnyāsa-āśrama*. However, non-*dvija* (women and males belonging to the *śūdra* class) have to be reborn as a male in one of the higher three classes in order to attain liberation. Therefore, while there is an important orientation to pursue material goals as a householder, there is

nevertheless the notion that the ultimate goal of liberation is attainable only by those with the ascriptive status of *dvija*, who are in a position to take on the traditional renunciate lifestyle of withdrawal from society during the last stage of life.

*The Renunciate Living in the Larger Context of Involvement in Society*

The last category, the *renunciate living in the larger context of social involvement*, refers to the path that consists of renouncing one's desires within the context of "living-in-this-world" in order to attain the ultimate goal of liberation. Various devotional movements began emerging around the first to sixth century CE for the masses throughout the Indian subcontinent. The devotional streams—including Mahāyāna Buddhism, Hindu Bhakti, the Sant tradition, and Sikhism—challenged the earlier and more socially conservative forms of religion, which had contended that renunciation is a prerequisite for liberation. Rather, the new devotional movements emphasized a path while living very much in the world, and it was open to both women and men of all castes. Renunciation now came to mean the renunciation of one's ego in the larger context of social involvement and responsibility.

Mahāyāna Buddhism (first century CE)<sup>27</sup> explicitly rejects the conservative Theravāda tradition of monasticism as the necessary means to liberation. The rejection of withdrawal from society is based on the premise that, while monks lead a life of purity to extinguish desire, they inevitably become preoccupied with it. Furthermore, renunciation often becomes a source of spiritual pride because Theravāda Buddhists view it as the only valid means to liberation, thus making it the "superior" choice or way to live.

Mahāyāna Buddhism teaches that the elimination of ignorance, desire, hatred, and anger can be achieved through acts of devotion and pure faith. Indeed, any devotee, who, with a pure heart and mind, remembers the name of a blessed Buddha, will be liberated:

Now what do you think, O Sariputa, for what reason is that repetition (treatise) of the Law called the favour of all Buddhas? Every son or daughter of a family who shall hear the name of that repetition of the law and retain in their memory the names of the blessed Buddhas, will be favoured by the Buddhas, and will never return again, being once in possession of the transcendent true knowledge. Therefore, then, O Sariputa, believe, accept, and do not doubt of me and those blessed Buddhas! (*The Smaller Sukhavati-vyūha* 17)<sup>28</sup>

The premise that anyone is able to attain liberation is based on the belief that everyone has the potential of becoming a Buddha through the compassion of the *bodhisattvas*—mythical beings who postpone their own *nirvāṇa* in order to help others attain liberation.<sup>29</sup> Compassion and grace are the key means for laypeople to attain liberation.<sup>30</sup> The notion that all humans possess the potential of buddhahood and that liberation is dependent on the devotee's faith and the *bodhisattva's* compassion, no doubt, improves the religious or spiritual status of females and the laity in general.

Unlike the mythical orientation of Mahāyāna Buddhism (with concepts like the *bodhisattva*), Hindu devotionalism—referred to as Bhakti (“devotion”)—is of an earthly nature, using human relations as the prototype for the relation between God and devotee.<sup>31</sup> Liberation was now attainable by all because the key elements in Bhakti are a simple faith and love directed to a personal God. The devotee is required to renounce his or her “ego,” and completely surrender to God with the single-minded desire of blissful union with Him. Liberation does not depend on renunciation of mundane existence (unlike the *varṇa-āśrama-dharma* schema described in the classical Hindu law books) because Bhakti calls for the renunciation of one's ego and total surrender to God. Here we see the theological break with the notion that liberation is achievable by only *dvijas*, because *mokṣa* is no longer dependent on Vedic education. There was, furthermore, a break—at least theoretically—with the strict rules surrounding brahminical rituals and the concepts of purity and pollution, thus also making temple religious practice and *mokṣa* accessible to all.

Another stream of Hindu devotion, called the Sant tradition, flourished from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century CE. The Sant tradition consists of Hindi speaking poet-saints in Northern India (such as Rajasthan and the Punjab) who taught a more “radical” path to liberation in which the realization of God is to be attained through devotional meditation on the Divine Name (*nāma*). In the Sant tradition, God is represented as a deity without form (*nirguṇa*).<sup>32</sup>

More radical than the Bhakti poet-saints, the Sants explicitly rejected all institutional forms of religion. In doing so, they denounced the notion of revelation (as in the *Vedas* or *Qur'an*), places of worship (*maṇḍira*, *masjid*), temple rituals, yogic practices, pilgrimage places, religious texts, and the need for clergy. Kabīr (ca. 15th century CE), a Sant, rejected all institutional forms of religion, even as he taught the simple yet difficult path of devotion to the Divine Name:

Pandit, do some research  
And let me know

How to destroy transiency.  
 Money, religion, pleasure, liberation—  
 Which way do they stay brother?  
 North, South, East or West?  
 In heaven or the underworld?  
 If Gopal is everywhere, where is hell?  
 Heaven and hell are for the ignorant,  
 Not for those who know Hari.  
 The fearful thing that everyone fears,  
 I do not fear.  
 I am not confused about sin and purity, heaven and hell.

Kabīr says, seekers listen!  
 Wherever you are  
 Is the entry point. (Kabīr, *Bījak śabda* 42)<sup>33</sup>

According to the Sants, one need not be preoccupied with religious customs or beliefs, since liberation or the realization of the true nature of one's soul is attainable through the mere recitation of the Divine Name. And, since liberation is achievable through the mere recitation of the Divine Name, giving up household life is not a requirement. In fact, renouncing this world is frowned on as it is viewed as a religious practice that only distracts devotees from self-realization.

According to McLeod, it is through the Sant tradition that Vaiṣṇava Bhakti, the Nāth yogic tradition, and Sufism have influenced Sikhism.<sup>34</sup> Although the Sikh tradition shares continuities with the Sant tradition, especially during its inception, it nevertheless has its own specific interpretation and integration of various beliefs and practices. The foundations of Sikhism were laid by Guru Nānak (1469–1539 CE), the first of a succession of ten Sikh gurus, who together established the Sikh religion.

The Sikh gurus, like the Sants, taught a radical rejection of all external forms of religion. Likewise, they also rejected the notion of renouncing the world and the taking to ascetic practices in order to attain *mokṣa*. The third Sikh guru, Amar Dās (1479–1574 CE) explains the futility of renunciation thus:

Some sit in the forest realms,  
 and do not answer any calls.  
 Some break ice in the cold [winter],  
 and bathe in freezing water.  
 Some rub ashes on their bodies,  
 and do not wash off the dirt.

With their hair matted,  
 some look wild,  
 and bring dishonour to their family lineage.  
 Some wander naked,  
 during the day and night,  
 and do not sleep.  
 Some burn their limbs with fire,  
 and damage themselves.  
 Without *nām*,  
 the body is reduced to ashes. . . .  
 (Vār Malār, M.3, GGS, pp. 1284–85)<sup>35</sup>

In their religious and social dissent, the Sikh gurus taught that the mere recitation of the Divine Name is the sufficient means to spiritual attainment. This inner devotion to *nāma* is open to all, irrespective of gender or caste. The Sikh theological and social stance on equality is similar to that of the Sant tradition; it opposes the classical Hindu belief that liberation is open only to males belonging to the three higher classes (*dvija*)—*brahmin*, *kṣatriya*, and *vaiśya*; as well it opposes the necessity of monastic or ascetic life advocated by Buddhism and Jainism.

In contrast with the opposing perspectives on renunciation as a prerequisite for liberation found in Hinduism and Buddhism, Sikhism offers a distinct stance against individuals withdrawing from society in the pursuit of liberation from *saṃsāra*. And it is in *Siddh Goṣṭ* that the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nānak, explicitly expounds on the question of why renunciation of the material world is not necessary for, or even useful in, the pursuit of *mokṣa*. Consequently, *Siddh Goṣṭ* is a fundamental philosophical text in the understanding of the Sikh position on renunciation and liberation. This brief but important text is essential to a better understanding of the unique evolution of the Sikh philosophical system. The present analysis of the text is addressed precisely to that aim.

#### METHODOLOGY

In the academic field, Sikh studies have, for the most part, been extremely polarized:<sup>36</sup> the “traditional historians” (for example, Trilochan Singh, Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon, Daljeet Singh)<sup>37</sup> versus the “critical [skeptical] historians” (e.g., W. H. McLeod, Harjot Singh Oberoi, Pashaura Singh).<sup>38</sup> While the “traditional historians” have as their aim to preserve or protect what Sikhs hold as the Truth, the “critical his-

torians" have as their primary goal the determination of historical facts concerning the development of Sikhism, such as the authenticity of texts and their authorship, and the historical accuracy in the interpretation of texts. In actual fact, the "traditional historians" have come to perceive the "critical historians" as attacking the Sikh faith and identity, whereas the latter view the former as being insensitive to the canons of scholarly research and the quest for historical truth.

It is noteworthy that, in addition to these two types of scholars, there has also been the tradition of the *giānī* (literally "possessors of knowledge"), Sikh philosopher-preacher. Although the term *giānī* has come to be used loosely to refer to anyone who may talk authoritatively about religion in the *gurdwārā* (Sikh temple) setting, traditionally there are teacher-student lineages involving rigorous training in learning about the religion and its practices (equivalent to the Hindu *ācārya*) for the purpose of propagation and teaching about the religion to the community. In acknowledging the *giānī* as an important traditional resource for learning about the Sikh tradition, the religious discourse has nevertheless to be viewed in the light of the *giānī*'s audience:

There is always the possibility of several interpretations in this process [*kathā*] of religious discourse, since each individual *giānī* maybe offering his or her own interpretation specific to the situation of a particular audience.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, for the *giānī*, the nature of any particular religious discourse is necessarily contextual, that is, influenced by his audience. Although *giānīs* are very learned in Sikh (and Hindu) literature and the beliefs and customs of the common folk, they do not, for the most part, engage in intellectual dialogue with the "traditional historians."

Scholarship on Sikhism can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, when the British began their rule in the Punjab. The early European scholars were interested in both Sikh religion (Trumpp, Macauliffe)<sup>40</sup> and Sikh history (Cunningham).<sup>41</sup> Their work was soon followed by the emergence of Sikh scholars (such as Teja Singh and Sahib Singh),<sup>42</sup> who entered into dialogue with the "Orientalists" during the period of the Singh Sabha movement, which had as its focus the creation of a distinct Sikh identity. This Orientalist-Sikh dialogue can be viewed as the embryonic stage of the more contemporary contentious debate on issues that have divided the traditional and critical historians in relation to academic work on Sikhism. Much controversy surrounds Sikh studies regarding a number of issues<sup>43</sup> most often rooted in the scholar's particular methodology. It centers primarily on the

employment by the “critical historians” of the textual-criticism method to Sikh scripture and religious literature as well as the use of historical methodology that involves deconstruction of events, followed by a new reconstruction.

As between the positions of the two opposed groups, this analysis adopts an approach that takes the middle ground. Related to the field of Indology, the analysis certainly recognizes and incorporates the relevant issues surrounding historical authenticity and accuracy. However, while the analysis looks at historical context and consistency, it does so without losing sight of that which is viewed as important to Sikh theology/tradition even as it deals with the religious significance of particular phenomena. An example from the study of another tradition is certainly enlightening here. In the work on Christianity, it is regarded as useful to reconstruct the “historical Jesus,” yet it is done without losing sight of the religious significance of the “Christ of faith.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, it is important to keep in mind both the “Guru Nānak of faith” and the “Faith of Guru Nānak.”<sup>45</sup>

This work, indeed, includes an inquiry into the historical accuracy and consistency of the corpus of Sikh literature, including the *janam-sākhīs* (hagiographies about Guru Nānak); yet it also takes into serious consideration that which does not strictly emerge as historical fact. Surely, “improbable” events described in the hagiographies may well have some religious significance beyond the domain of history. And, while historical context is undoubtedly important in looking at religious development, a mere historical reconstruction may well fall far short in understanding matters relating to religious beliefs and practices. Indeed, one needs to shed light on religious phenomena that matter and make sense to the believer.<sup>46</sup>

This work on *Siddh Goṣṭ* is a textual analysis of the hymn in the context of the Sikh literature concerning Guru Nānak and his meetings with the Nāth yogis. It aims not only to take into consideration the historical context of the hymn, but also seeks to explore the hymn’s religious significance beyond historical fact and inconsistency. That is, this work attempts to look at the metaphorical meanings and theological significance of the seemingly illogical events in the hagiographies surrounding Guru Nānak and the Nāth yogis. In doing so, the study draws on information that is communicated by *giānīs*, who are familiar with the oral tradition surrounding *Siddh Goṣṭ*.

#### AIMS OF THE STUDY

The chief aims of this work are: (1) to provide an understanding of *Siddh Goṣṭ* (and Sikhism in general) in the larger framework of the



typology of the four different religious lifestyles manifest among the four main Indian religions, (2) to provide an analysis of the key theological beliefs of Guru Nānak that are expounded in *Siddh Goṣṭ*, (3) to demonstrate how Guru Nānak's philosophical system is actually put into practice, (4) to establish how Nāth yogic terminology has been appropriated in Sikh scripture even as the latter rejects Nāth belief and practice, and, last, (5) to provide an original English translation of *Siddh Goṣṭ*.

The textual analysis of *Siddh Goṣṭ* (or for that matter, any text, regardless of its size) involves knowledge about three aspects concerning the context of the text to be interpreted. These three aspects are: (1) the historical life-situation of the author of the text (chapter 3), (2) the function of the text, including the audience for whom, and the purpose for which, the text was written (chapter 4), and (3) the theological or philosophical orientation of the text (chapter 5). Since the *Siddh Goṣṭ* consists of a discourse between the author and a second party, there is an additional aspect that requires attention, and that is familiarity with the second party—the Nāth yogis—the people with whom the author is engaged in discussion (chapter 2). Further, adequately grasping the meaning of the text involves special focus on how Guru Nānak rejects the traditional householder and ascetic religious lifestyles even as he uses ascetic terminology to teach the path of “True” yoga while “living-in-this-world” (chapter 6). All four aspects of textual analysis require attention, and are therefore explored in the chapters that follow.

Before commencing the analysis of Guru Nānak's teachings on “True” yoga as expounded in *Siddh Goṣṭ*, it is necessary to first provide background material on the Nāth yogis and Guru Nānak, the two participants in the *Siddh Goṣṭ* discourse. Therefore, an analysis of the Nāth yogic tradition as well as information on the life of Guru Nānak and the sources regarding his encounters and discourses with the Nāth yogis are the topics of the next two chapters, respectively.