



Radhasoami: A Critical History of Guru Succession

David Christopher Lane

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Presents a critical overview of guru succession in the Radhasoami Tradition from its inception in the mid-1850s up until early 1991. Provides vital information for anyone interested in the politics behind guru succession in general. Includes extensive notes and an exhaustive bibliography. Focuses specifically on the development of gurus in the Agra and Beas' branches and includes information on lesser known gurus and movements, including Faqir Chand and Manavta Mandir. Central Issue: On August 24, 1974, Kirpal Singh, a renowned guru of surat shabd yoga ("union of the soul/consciousness with the sacred sound") and founder of Ruhani Satsang, died at the age of eighty. His death caused an intense succession dispute amongst his thousands of followers that has yet to be mended. Eventually a number of factions developed, each following a different successor. Although most of Kirpal Singh's followers rallied around Darshan Singh, Kirpal's son, others paid allegiance to either Thakar Singh of Delhi or Ajaib Singh of Rajasthan. The interesting sociological question that confronts us here is how each successor to Kirpal Singh legitimized his role. That is, what type of ideological strategy did these would-be gurus develop in order to solidify their constituencies? Further, what were the social and historical factors that influenced or constrained their gaddi nasheen rhetoric? To properly address and answer these questions necessitates a fairly comprehensive overview of the social context in which these surat shabd yoga gurus live and teach. Thus, this study begins with a historical overview of Sant mat and Radhasoami in general. And secondly, I have focused on the specific parampara (guru lineage) that preceded Kirpal Singh and his successors. General Thesis The central thesis of this work is that there is an observable pattern which governs the "ideological work" (i.e., rhetoric) of guru succession in the Sant mat and Radhasoami traditions--namely, successorship claimants who lack sufficient outward confirmation to be accepted by the majority of the guru's congregation move generally toward experiential, inward, and personal forms of verification. This movement towards internal validation, moreover, brings with it an inclination to question the forms of legitimacy that brought solidarity to the majority party and its leader. Hence, minority claimants (usually those who do not retain the gaddi--seat of the guru's residence) tend, in Max Weber's terms, to criticize the routinization of charisma by "office" and argue for the superiority of "personal" attainment. The politics of guru succession, therefore, is essentially a conflict over the nature and transference of charisma (spiritual power). Using Ken Wilber's terminology (as found in *A Sociable God*) this thesis can also be phrased as: those who lack legitimacy (outward confirmation by the consensus majority) point to their authenticity (inward confirmation by individuals experientially or mystically) as the primary means for verifying their roles. Additionally, guru succession is oftentimes a struggle over controlling theological doctrines, membership ranks, and property rights. Hence, gurus do not merely represent their own inner callings, but various material interests, ranging from the "right interpretation" of Radhasoami teachings to the governance of sadhu and household members of outlying branches to ownership rights over inherited sacred property. With such larger "worldly" issues at stake, it is little wonder that guru politics can turn into an ugly slugfest between sister-related communities. The decades long legal battle between Dayal Bagh and Soami Bagh over worship rights at Shiv Dayal Singh's samadh is perhaps the most graphic illustration of how social factors play a central part in succession contests. Based on years of extensive research from the author's numerous trips to India and personal interaction with a large number of shabd yoga gurus.

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