

Radhasoamis

The Radhasoami Satsang is a new religious movement in the Hindu tradition that has become a global phenomenon, reflecting the values and spiritual needs of a modern transnational community. It has spread from northern India to the United States, United Kingdom, South Africa, and elsewhere, garnering over a million and a half adherents worldwide. It was founded in Agra in 1861 by Swami Shiv Dayal Singh, who propounded a new form of spiritual practice, *suratśabad yoga* (the discipline of uniting sound and spirit), that could be adopted by modern businesspeople, housewives, and administrators. The term *radhasoami* literally means the lord (*svāmin*, or *soami*) of → Rādhā, the consort of the Hindu god → Kṛṣṇa, but since the movement does not believe in a god with anthropomorphic characteristics, the term *radhasoami* is construed to mean the master of spiritual energy. In some branches of the movement, *radhasoami* is regarded as the name of god and the name of the highest level of consciousness, and the very uttering of the word conveys spiritual power.

On the basis of the teachings of the medieval Hindu → Sant tradition, Radhasoami and other modern Sant movements (collectively known as Sant Mat) are organized around several central concepts:

1. → *guru*, the notion that ultimate reality and absolute authority are located in a person with whom one can have a redemptive relationship;

2. *bhajan* (lit. music; see → *kīrtan* and → *bhajan*), the idea that the self can be transformed into its ethereal essence, a divine harmony, through love and meditation practices;

3. *satsaṅg* (the true fellowship), the concept of communal organization that provides an alternative to Hindu and Western forms of social structure;

4. → *sevā*, or service, an understanding of social responsibility and ethics based on obedience to the *guru*; and

5. *bhandara*, the idea that time and space are centered in great communal gatherings held at the headquarters of each branch of the movement.

New groups emerge when the death of a *guru* produces more than one successor. By the beginning of the 21st century, more than 20 branches of the movement had been established as each

succeeding master often left more than one successor. The Dayalbagh community in Agra has established a university and a cluster of industries. The largest – the Beas branch – has built a spiritual city near Amritsar in → Punjab. One of the most international offshoots of the Beas branch, the Ruhani Satsang (Spiritual Fellowship), was founded in Delhi. The oldest branch of the movement, Soamibagh, is located at the site of the founding *guru*'s meditation garden near Agra, where a colossal cathedral-like marble tomb in honor of the founding *guru* has been under construction for most of the 20th century. Across the street, the Dayalbagh branch of the movement boasts a residential colony, factories, agricultural activities, and a university.

From the beginning, the movement attracted Western followers, including British administrators and American spiritualists. During the 1960s and 1970s, Radhasoami Satsang became a part of the explosion of interest in Hindu-based *guru* movements in the West, and movements such as the Divine Light (see → Sivananda) and Eckankar (established by the American spiritual teacher Paul Twitchell in 1965) are based on its teachings. In the 21st century, increasingly the followers in the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere in the West include a substantial number of Indian immigrants who find in the Radhasoami Satsang a more accessible and modern form of spirituality than is provided by traditional Hindu rituals and customs. Thus it has become a global religion for a transnational diaspora community.

In this essay, I will explore further the two major branches of the movement – Dayalbagh and Beas.

The Utopian Society of Dayalbagh

The Dayalbagh community is an attempt to fashion a utopian Radhasoami social alternative to modern society. During its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s, it developed a cluster of industries at its headquarters on the outskirts of Agra and elsewhere throughout India that produced everything from leather goods to shaving soap. From the time of its establishment in 1915, there has been a broad public interest in what has been known

as the Dayalbagh experiment, and a parade of government officials and social reformers, from Nehru on down, have made their pilgrimage to the colony's headquarters on the outskirts of Agra.

What Nehru discovered on his visit to Dayalbagh in 1956 was the efficient use of modern technology by a spiritually dedicated religious community. Other visitors also remarked about this alliance of spiritual and technological power. "What Dayalbagh teaches," Maulana Mohammad Yakub, a newspaper editor from Lahore, exclaimed on visiting Dayalbagh during the 1930s, "is what great miracles can be performed by God force – like other forces of Nature, e.g. steam, electricity, etc. – when building up an ideal structure of human society." The editor went on to state that Dayalbagh was as grand an achievement for the city of Agra in the social realm as the Tāj Mahal had been in the architectural.

Seeing the colony as an example of the integration of Hindu spirituality and modern values, many other progressive Indian politicians over the years have kept close ties with Dayalbagh. Even → Gandhi sent condolences to Dayalbagh at the time of the death of its founding *guru*, Anand Swarup. More recently, V.V. Giri frequently visited Dayalbagh during his tenure as president of India.

From 1931 on, annual exhibitions of Dayalbagh goods throughout India were inaugurated by government officials. Through government assistance, a hydroelectric substation was built in the colony, and government agencies became large purchasers of Dayalbagh products – especially dairy products from Dayalbagh's model farms. During World War II, government officials arranged for American troops stationed in Agra to purchase their milk from Dayalbagh in preference to the Indian military's own dairy (*Souvenir in Commemoration of the First Centenary of the Radhasoami Satsang*, 1962, 327).

What makes Dayalbagh effective as a social and economic organization is not any special technique of administration but a spirit of collective ownership and a sense of common destiny. The members of the Dayalbagh community are joint owners of the community through a legal trust, but the master ultimately "owns" Dayalbagh: it is he who presides over the property and industry of the community. Individuals live and work there at his behest and partake in its ownership only through their relationship with him. In part

for tax reasons, the title to Dayalbagh property has from the beginning been in the name of an administrative society, and since 1937 virtually all of the Radhasoami factories have become limited companies and cooperatives, legally owned by the members of the fellowship who work in them. Yet the directives for administering them come from offices at Dayalbagh.

Since 2003 the spiritual master at Dayalbagh has been Dr Prem Saran Satsangi, who had formerly been the academic dean of the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi. This follows a precedent at Dayalbagh of having distinguished academic administrators chosen to be the spiritual master. The previous spiritual master was M.B. Lal, the former vice chancellor of Lucknow University. According to Radhasoami theology, the spiritual leaders are not actually chosen by the followers, but rather meetings are held to determine to whom the spirit of *guru*-ship has appeared among the previous master's disciples.

At Dayalbagh, the choice of an academic administrator is a good one, since the colony houses a major university, and any kind of administrative background is useful for a leadership role that involves worldly management issues as well as spiritual matters. In some ways, the Dayalbagh master is like Plato's philosopher-king, a parallel that was first drawn by Anand Swarup, the founder of Dayalbagh, who once said, "when I first read Plato's *Republic* I was pleasantly surprised to find...many of the ideas I am trying to express here" (quoted in Brunton, 1935, 237).

Anand Swarup's "republic" envisaged a balance between an enlightened constituency and strong leadership, resulting in great civic pride. He described Dayalbagh's ownership as "trusts to be administered in a religious spirit," and explained the differences between it and the more familiar kind of socialism as follows. Although "the farms and colleges are owned by the community," he said in an interview, "this ownership extends to land and houses...Everyone is perfectly free to possess and accumulate whatever money and property he has," and this fact makes Dayalbagh free "from the tyrannies of socialism." Moreover, Anand Swarup concluded, "everything is subordinated to our spiritual ideal" (Brunton, 1935, 236).

At Dayalbagh, one's salvation is thought to be affected by the quality of one's social life. Anand Swarup described this ideal of worldly renuncia-

tion as “better-worldliness” – a purified, spiritualized form of worldliness that he depicted as superior to the extremes of crass materialism and otherworldly renunciation. Better-worldliness, he claimed, should be the “aim of man’s life on this earth” (*Souvenir* . . . , 1962, 313).

By participating in better-worldliness, Dayalbagh devotees were contributing to their own destiny and to the destiny of society at large. Involvement in Dayalbagh economic and organizational activities, for example, provides an opportunity for *sevā* on a social scale. The present master reminded a group of his followers who were setting up displays of Dayalbagh products that “the exhibitions are not held for earning profit” but “to inculcate a spirit of cooperation and to work together with love and affection and to earn the Grace of Huzur Radhasoami Dayal” (“Review of Progress Made by Satsang Institutions during the Last Ten Years,” 1985, 12).

When Anand Swarup established his first factories, he called them model industries and intended them to be showpieces of technology and organization. The first product to be manufactured, in 1917, was a simple leather button for British military uniforms. Within ten years, Dayalbagh factories were producing surgical instruments, electric fans, textiles, fountain pens, gramophones, and a whole host of leather products.

One of the reasons why they were successful with leather goods was that Radhasoami residents had no compunction about working with animal hides, thought to be polluting by traditional Hindus. After their zenith in the 1930s, however, Dayalbagh industries have been in something of a decline. A steady increase in market competition and alterations in government income-tax policies regarding properties owned by religious organizations cut deeply into Radhasoami profits.

In 1942, in an effort to prove that the colony was self-supporting and required its enormous assets for spiritual purposes, Dayalbagh made a ruling prohibiting even its own members from contributing to the organization. Nonetheless, tax officials continued to hound the Dayalbagh offices. Under M.B. Lal’s leadership, there was a revival of production and sales of Dayalbagh products. In the first ten years of M.B. Lal’s administration – from 1975 to 1984 – the number of Dayalbagh stores throughout India expanded from 11 to 53, and 22 new production units were

established in the same period, manufacturing handloom cloth, soaps, wash powders, and similar products.

Even more dramatic has been the development of new educational institutions under M.B. Lal’s regime. Although Dayalbagh has had schools and colleges since 1917, soon after it was founded, M.B. Lal has been keen on expanding this aspect of Anand Swarup’s vision, which was first articulated in one of Dayalbagh’s early reports. “Animated by the desire to educate the masses,” the report explained, the people of Dayalbagh created schools to “do our little bit in a decent manner” (*Prospectus for 1918, Report for 1917*, 1918, 3). It went on to laud “the kingdom of knowledge, founded, under the aegis of the mighty and unshakeable British Raj, with no selfish motives of any kind” (*Prospectus for 1918, Report for 1917*, 1918, 14).

This kingdom of knowledge was explored during cultural evenings at Dayalbagh, on which plays and readings from William Shakespeare enlivened the colony’s convocations. This heritage has been revived under M.B. Lal’s leadership. In 1981 he persuaded the government of India to authorize a new university at Dayalbagh, one based on its existing colleges. The university – the Dayalbagh Educational Institute (DEI) – was created as a “deemed university” by a special charter of the University Grants Commission of the Indian government. As such it is a national university, rather than a state institution, a status it shares with the Indian Institute of Science, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, and the Gandhigram Rural Institute, among others. For many years, the head of DEI was G.P. Sherry, daughter of M.B. Lal’s predecessor as master at Dayalbagh, Gurcharandas Mehta.

What makes DEI unusual are its four required core courses, intended to inculcate civic values and a sensitivity to the liberal arts. The 1987 prospectus for the university describes them as follows:

1. cultural education (to take pride in the national ethos so that one may not lose one’s moorings);
2. comparative study of religion: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the Sant Mat, and modern religious movements (to ingrain an attitude of tolerance and a sense of national integration and inculcate moral and spiritual values);

3. scientific methodology, general knowledge, and current affairs (to nurture a scientific temper and be aware of contemporary developments);

4. rural development: study of rural society and economy (to foster a fuller understanding of the rural life with a view to appreciate properly the polity and the economy of our country and the social forces at work).

The fourth course also includes a practicum: students must volunteer for participation in a peace corps-type rural-development project, usually during summer vacation. Also required is participation in physical-education classes (“Games”) and classes in the arts, such as music, drama, and dance. All this is in addition to the students’ major fields of study, which at DEI are primarily in the sciences and technical fields such as commerce and engineering. G.P. Sherry told me that through this approach, DEI creates better persons, not just better students (personal communication, Dec 8, 1986). M.B. Lal, echoing sentiments first expressed by Anand Swarup, told me that the educational institutions of Dayalbagh create an environment where children will become “supermen” able to bring into being a transformed, better-worldly society (interview; Aug 13, 1986).

Considering the noisy streets of ordinary Indian cities, Dayalbagh appears to have achieved a transformed society already. Its prosperous tree-lined streets caused one American visitor to describe it as “Westernization with a vengeance” (Brunton, 1935, 228). From land that was reclaimed when the Yamunā River changed its banks almost a hundred years ago, A. Swarup and his successors created a model city of some five thousand residents. Like Soamibagh, a smaller, rival Radhasoami colony located across the street on the site of the original master’s meditation garden, the Dayalbagh colony is legally designated a town. It is a multiregional town, however, and one may find neighborhoods containing Rajasthanis, Punjabis, Biharis, Bengalis, and Tamils as well as people from neighboring Uttar Pradesh. This diverse constituency was attracted to Dayalbagh over the years as Anand Swarup and successive masters went on tour. In general there are fewer Gujaratis and Sindhis in Dayalbagh than in Soamibagh, and more devotees from South India and Bengal. The Bengali, Tamil, and Telugu languages are taught in Dayalbagh schools, and there is a major branch of Dayalbagh in Andhra Pradesh at

Cocanada, established by P. Sitaramayya, an energetic follower of Anand Swarup.

The cosmopolitan, genteel atmosphere at Dayalbagh befits what Anand Swarup envisaged as a socialism of the elite – the “Aris-Demo” ideal, as he called it. Anand Swarup wanted Dayalbagh’s residents to “act as if they were a Democratic Community of Aristocrats – Aristocrats, not on account of wealth, etc., but Aristocrats in Spirituality” (*Souvenir...*, 1962, 358). Aristocracy was not meant to imply a life of leisure, however, as Gurcharandas Mehta dramatically showed: he is said to have “denied himself rest and comfort and lived up to the great motto ‘Work is Worship’” (*Souvenir...*, 1962, 358).

At Dayalbagh hard work and a sense of being elite were compatible. Anand Swarup initially envisaged an ideal city containing not more than 12,000 residents, the maximum that he felt was possible for decent living. He did not want to copy “the monstrous towns of your Western countries; they are overcrowded and therefore breed many undesirable qualities.” Instead, he wanted to build “a garden city where people can work and live happily, where they can have plenty of space and air” (Brunton, 1935, 236).

After completing Dayalbagh, Anand Swarup hoped to create similar model cities all over India, “at least one in each province.” With the exception of a colony called Soaminagar, near New Delhi, however, his dream remained unfulfilled until 1984, when M.B. Lal embarked on a program of decentralization intended to expand the sales and production units of Dayalbagh industries and to create new residential colonies at Lucknow, Roorkee, Vishakhapatnam, and Kanpur; other colonies are planned in Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar.

In a modest way, then, Anand Swarup’s plan for the proliferation of Dayalbaghs is being enacted. One English visitor during the time of Anand Swarup thought that the Dayalbagh ideal could be replicated throughout India if only there were a hundred leaders of Anand Swarup’s quality. Then, he wrote, “how quickly India might become a smiling land, clean, gay, prosperous, dustless and at peace within her borders” (quoted in Brown, *Lancer at Large*; repr. in *Souvenir...*, 1962, 366). The question remains, however, whether even with the Radhasoami community, Dayalbagh’s experiment with “better-worldliness” is a viable model for social change.

The Spiritual Kingdom of Beas

The only Radhasoami community larger than Dayalbagh is Beas, located near the city of Amritsar in the heart of the Punjab. It has none of the industrial and educational accoutrements of Dayalbagh, but in some ways, it is also a social experiment: like Dayalbagh, it is a *dera*, a spiritual colony, created by and for the master. Sitting by itself on the riverbank at the end of a narrow country road some kilometers from the nearest railway station, it appears from a distance like a dream city. The towers of the monumental Satsang Ghar float ethereally above the plains, and surrounding it are sturdy brick homes and well paved, quiet streets. This model city is all the more striking because of the contrast with its rude surroundings. The rough eroded gullies along the banks of the Beas River that were once thought to be inhabited by ghosts became in the 1980s the hideouts of young Sikh terrorists hunted down by the Indian government's armed police. But despite the ghosts and terrorists, many of Beas' visitors think of "this beautiful little dera" as, in the words of one American devotee, "a sacred spot" (Johnson, 1971, 99). As at Dayalbagh, the facilities at Beas are expansive and modern, but even in physical appearance, there are substantial differences between the two.

Factories and schools dominate the landscape at Dayalbagh, whereas at Beas, the Satsang Ghar looms above all else. Offices and product showrooms at Dayalbagh are the busiest areas, while at Beas, the liveliest quarters are the publications center and the hostels for international guests. At Dayalbagh one is liable to meet only middle-class, merchant-caste Indians, most of them Hindu. At Beas the scene is much more diverse.

The master at Dayalbagh, Dr Prem Saran Satsangi, lives in a comfortable but modest bungalow in the center of the colony, easily accessible to the rest of the community. At Beas, by contrast, the residence of the master – currently Master Gurinder Singh – is almost invisible to passersby: only one little room on the third floor and a television antenna peek over the high red-brick walls that surround the manse that he shares with his family. When the master leaves the guarded gate, he does not saunter alone as Dr Prem Saran Satsangi often does at Dayalbagh; in fact, he does not walk at all but is driven in a small gray car even when his destination is only the Satsang Ghar a block away. The reason is a sound one, for the

crowd hoping to catch a glimpse of his presence would surely make it impossible for him to walk anywhere other than with a phalanx of guards. At Dayalbagh the *guru* is treated rather like a revered chairman of the board. At Beas, he is a spiritual king, and this means that the whole colony at Beas takes on more the appearance of a magical kingdom than Dayalbagh, since it is not burdened with the mundane matters of running factories and selling products and administering universities. Almost all of Beas' permanent residents have come to the colony after retirement, and most volunteer their labor on behalf of an organization that has no reason to exist other than to maintain and expand itself. They are proud to serve at a spiritual court. The honorific title Maharajji given to Master Gurinder Singh's predecessor, Charan Singh, is in many ways apt, for to many, he was the *mahārājā* of Beas. Like the relationships among friends that anthropologists label "fictive kinships," Beas has produced what might be called a "fictive kingship."

As many films and novels in India indicate, there is a lingering nostalgia for the era of the princely states. This is especially true in the Punjab, where until the States Reorganization Act of 1956, small distinctive kingdoms were the dominant form of political organization. *Mahārājās* and *mahārāṇīs* ruled over their dominions with great splendor, leaving the actual administration of the kingdoms in the hands of their chief secretaries, the *dīwāns*, whose power was often more palpable than that of the *mahārājās* themselves. It is an interesting fact – perhaps only a coincidence – that Gurinder Singh and his uncle, Charan Singh, were members of the caste from which most of Punjab's princes were drawn (Jats); similarly his office staff comes from the castes that supplied the *dīwāns* (Khatris). And indeed, this latter connection is a real one. The former administrator of Beas, Daryai Lal Kapur, was known as Diwan Sahib because of his role as judge and finance minister in the princely state of Kapurthala. In other Radhasoami branches, leaders have also served as administrators in princely states. Shyam Lal of the Dhara Sindhu Pratap Ashram served the Gwalior princes, and one of his successors, Thakar Mansingh, worked in the court's bureaucracy. The founder of the Radhasoami movement, Swami Shiv Dayal, also served in the administration of a princely state, and family members of Radhasoami leaders – including Swami Shiv Dayal's family – have also served in courtly capacities. G.D. Sahgal, former president

of the Dayalbagh Sabha, was the descendent of an administrator in the court of Ranjit Singh, the great 19th-century king of Punjab (interview with G.D. Sahgal at Dayalbagh, Aug 13, 1985). For an interesting discussion of the regal aspects of Radhasoami, see S. Kakar (1982, 136–137). At Beas and other Radhasoami organizations, these roles are kept alive in a new form.

One of these forms of regal spirituality may be found in the courtly politics of Beas' inner administrative circles. Although the line of command is clearly specified – subcommittee heads report to superiors in higher committees, and the whole structure comes under the review of a general secretary who reports directly to the master – personal relationships count for much. The structure allows some officers to bypass the general secretary: members of the trust committee reported directly to Maharaj Charan Singh, as have regional representatives outside of India (interview with K.L. Khanna at Beas, May 26, 1971).

Gurinder Singh's personal secretary and staff also were exempt from the general secretary's command, and certain other individuals ignored the formal structure by going directly to the master with their concerns. These included members of prominent old Radhasoami families and distinguished Radhasoamis, such as professors, politicians, and business people. Theoretically anyone can speak directly with the master, but access to him is a privilege obtained easily only by a few. Each of these features revives one aspect of the organization of a traditional Indian kingdom.

The personal authority that the spiritual king provides is an interesting adaptation to the otherwise modern, even meritocratic, pattern of Radhasoami organization. One might say that it is a form of leadership that is peculiarly premodern. Yet it is appropriate for the circumstances of the modern age, for an authority with whom one has an intimate relationship – a father, a spiritual master, or a divinely granted king – is capable of doing much more than adjudicate among the competing interests of individuals: he or she can awaken conscience, command sacrifice, and engender loyalty and love. In premodern societies, the institution of kingship served both individual interests and the cause of communal identity by providing a single figure to whom a large group of people could relate and through whom they could

be in touch with one another as well. What made kingship work was a relationship of trust that was virtually always buttressed by religion.

The democracies that replaced kingships relied on a different sort of trust for their authority: a trust in reason, due process, and the good will of civic-minded citizens. It is not surprising that when trust in these elements has been eroded, people embrace an earlier form of public authority, such as the spiritual kings of Radhasoami. The personal relationships that Radhasoami followers form with their leaders allow them to restore their faith in social organization, at least within the protected settings of the Radhasoami communities.

Bibliography

- Ashby, P.H., "Popular Esoteric Religion: Radha Soami Satsang," in: P.H. Ashby, *Modern Trends in Hinduism*, New York, 1969, 71–90.
- Babb, L.A., *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition*, Berkeley, 1986.
- Brunton, P., *A Search in Secret India*, New York, 1935, repr. 1959.
- Diem-Lane, A., *The Guru in America: The Influence of Radhasoami on New Religions*, Los Angeles, 2008.
- DeWitt Griswold, H., *Insights into Modern Hinduism*, New York, 1934.
- Gold, D., *The Lord as Guru: Hindi Sants in North Indian Tradition*, New York, 1987.
- Johnson, J., *With a Great Master in India*, Beas, 1971.
- Juergensmeyer, M., *Radhasoami Reality: The Logic of a Modern Faith*, Princeton, 1991.
- Kakar, S., *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*, Boston, 1982, 119–150.
- Lane, D., *The Radhasoami Tradition: A Critical History of Guru Succession*, Los Angeles, 2011.
- Mathur, A.P., *Radhasoami Faith: A Historical Study*, Delhi, 1974.
- Prospectus for 1918, Report for 1917*, publ. Radhasoami Educational Institute, Hyderabad, 1918.
- Ram, R.S.M., *With the Three Masters*, 3 vols., Beas, 1967.
- "Review of Progress Made by Satsang Institutions during the Last Ten Years (1975–1984)," suppl. to the *Dayalbagh Herald*, Aug 13, 1985.
- Souvenir in Commemoration of the First Centenary of the Radhasoami Satsang (1861–1961)*, publ. Radhasoami Satsang Sabha, Agra, 1962.
- Yakub, M.M., *The Light*, Dec 28, 1936.

MARK JUERGENSEMEYER