BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN SIKHS AND MUSLIMS: The Contribution of Khwaja Hasan Nizami

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Running right through the almost five centuries of the history of the Sikh people down to the present day has been an unresolved dilemma of Sikh communal identity. As Oberoi persuasively argues, claims and counter-claims over who exactly the Sikhs are and whether or not Sikhism can legitimately be seen as an independent religion seem to have become particularly heated in the communally surcharged climate of nineteenth century Punjab with the extension of British rule into the region (Oberoi, 1994). A landmark event in this regard was the publication in 1899 of Kahn Singh's tract, *Ham Hindu Nahin* ('We Are Not Hindus'), forcefully rebutting the argument that the Sikhs were simply another branch of the wider Hindu community (Singh, 1899/1973). From then onwards until today, scholars and polemicists of various persuasions have been furiously debating the vexed question of Sikh community identity.

Four general approaches to the question of Sikh religious identity can be discerned in the writings on the subject. The first of these, common in the writings of a great many contemporary Sikh scholars, is the assertion that Guru Nanak, the first Guru of the Sikhs, was himself appointed by God for a divine mission to establish an entirely new religion distinct from the main religious traditions of the Punjab of his times, Islam and what, for want of a better word, can be called 'Hinduism'. In these writings, the Guru is presented as the founding father of the Sikh 'nation', an independent entity in its own right. While such a claim fits in neatly with the present-day demand by some Sikhs for a separate political status for the Sikh people, it seems greatly at odds with the available historical evidence that nowhere suggests any desire on Guru Nanak's part to

add yet another sect to the bewildering variety of narrow and divisive religious orthodoxies that he spent his life crusading against.

A second theory, commonly put forward by certain Sikh and Hindu writers, is that Sikhism is essentially a reformist movement within 'Hinduism' itself. Nanak, in their writings, emerges as simply one of the many 'Hindu' social and religious reformers of the Bhakti mystical tradition, crusading against idolatry, Brahmanism, caste and untouchability, while still remaining within the boundaries of the 'Hindu' fold. A more extreme version of this thesis is one that combines Nanak's 'Hindu reformism' with a passionate zeal against what are described as 'fanatic' Muslim invaders and the looming 'threat' of mass conversions to Islam among the Punjabis of his times. The Guru, then, is projected as a valiant champion of 'Hinduism' against the 'onslaught' of Islam, and the Sikh community, in turn, is depicted as nothing less then 'the sword-arm' of the 'Hindus', particularly the Brahmins. As in the case of the claim that the Guru's intention was to establish an independent religion, this thesis, too, is greatly at odds with the available evidence. It also seems to follow what has been termed a 'temporo-centric' approach—an effort to read the past in terms of the prejudices of a later age—in this context, the growing conflict between the Sikh leadership and the Mughals long after Guru Nanak's death.

A third approach to the early history of the Sikhs, and one that seems more in conformity with the historical evidence, argues for a certain definite Sufi or Muslim impact on Guru Nanak's thoughts and teachings. Yet, even those who recognize this are divided among themselves over the precise extent of this influence. At one end, this factor is grudgingly recognized but then vehemently belittled. Thus, for instance, Anil Chandra Banerjee, who contends that the development of Baba Nanak's 'cult' was "within the framework of Hinduism" itself though "conditioned, to some extent, by the challenge of Buddhism, Jainism and

Islam", argues that "the influence of Sufism on Nanak's thought is intangible" (Banerjee, 1983). Likewise, W.H. McLeod, while noting Nanak's extensive contacts with Muslim mystics, writes that "Muslim influence upon the thought of Guru Nanak must be regarded as relatively slight" (McLeod, 1988).

Adopting a more balanced approach, some scholars have argued that Nanak borrowed freely from the 'higher elements' of both the 'Hindu' as well as the Islamic mystical traditions (J.E. Carpenter, quoted in Banerjee, 1983). Fredrick Pincott goes even further by claiming a seminal Sufi influence on Nanak, suggesting that Nanak's doctrines can be best understood as a local Punjabi variant of Sufi mystical doctrines (Pincott, 1979). Pincott is not alone in this regard. As early as 1885, the Christian missionary and renowned Islamic scholar Thomas Patrick Hughes found ample justification for including an eleven-page entry on Sikhism in his celebrated and still popular *Dictionary of Islam* on the basis of the remarkable Islamic influence that he discerned on the teachings of the early Sikh gurus, particularly Baba Nanak (Hughes, 1885/1988).

Proponents of the fourth approach to the question of Sikh origins and identity, almost all Muslims themselves, suggest that, since Baba Nanak's teachings are almost identical with Sufi Islam, it is probable that Baba Nanak had himself turned Muslim. The reference to 'Hindu' mythological figures and mystical concepts in Baba Nanak's teachings, these authors argue, was simply a means to facilitate the transmission of Muslim doctrines within the primarily 'Hindu' cultural milieu in which Baba Nanak lived and preached in order to make these teachings more intelligible to his audience. Sila-Khan, the latest exponent of this view, contends on the basis of a close inspection of Nizari Ismaili and Sikh records and traditions that Baba Nanak was possibly an Ismaili Shia Muslim himself who practised *taqiyya* (pious dissimulation) by "appearing outwardly as a

Hindu." *Taqiyya* on the part of Nanak and his alleged Ismaili Shia disciples, she suggests, could have stemmed from the fear of persecution at the hands of Sunni Muslim rulers. Moreover, the adoption of a Hindu form in order to present the Islamic content of his message, she contends, was perfectly in line with the traditions of the Ismaili missionaries (*dais*) of north India of that period.

While Sila-Khan is probably the first to suggest an Ismaili Shia identity for Baba Nanak, the belief that Baba Nanak was actually a Muslim seems to have been fairly widely held in Punjabi Muslim circles. This would explain the widespread popularity of the saying: "*Baba Nanak Shah Faqir Hindu da Guru Muslaman da Pir*," ("Baba Nanak Shah, the Mendicant, Guru of the Hindus and *Pir* of the Muslims") (Duggal, 1994). And as Duggal notes, Baba Nanak was looked upon by many Muslims as a *waliullah* ('friend of God') in his own lifetime, a term of respect reserved for spiritually exalted Sufi saints in the Muslim mystical tradition (Duggal, 1994).

Although in certain Sufi circles the great respect accorded to Nanak and the belief that Nanak himself was a great Sufi managed to linger on, it was because of the increasingly strained political relations between the Sikhs and the Mughals, especially after the death of the tenth Sikh guru, Gobind Singh, that Sikhism came to be seen as clearly distinct from, and, in many ways, even hostile to, Islam. Consequently, the belief that Baba Nanak was actually a Muslim *wali* seems to have gradually lost favour, and the Sikhs became increasingly identified with the 'Hindus' or, later still, as a separate community by themselves.

One of the few, and certainly the most prominent, of twentieth-century writers to have once again articulated the claim of Baba Nanak's Muslim identity was the

noted Delhi-based Muslim scholar, Khwaja Hasan Nizami (1879-1955). A learned Sufi and a prolific writer, Nizami hailed from a family of hereditary custodians of the shine of the renowned and widely-venerated Chishti mystic, Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi. Nizami's principal biographer, Mulla Wahidi, writes that he had over five hundred books on an amazing variety of subjects to his credit (quoted in Naqvi, 1978). A major concern in his writings was the defence as well as the spread of Islam. With inter-communal relations rapidly degenerating into bloody rioting all across north India in the second decade of the twentieth century, Nizami increasingly turned his attention to staving off what he saw as the growing threats aimed at Islam and the Muslims, emerging largely from the fast escalation in aggressive Hindu communalism.

It was in this period that Nizami wrote some of his most noted works. Of these, the most prominent and controversial and one that attracted the attention of large numbers of Hindus, Muslims as well as the British colonial authorities, was his *Dai-i-Islam* ('The Missionary of Islam') (Nizami, 1923). In this little tract Nizami argued for a well-organized and community-wide programme of *tabligh* or Islamic missionary work among non-Muslims. Tabligh was, he stressed, the crying need of the hour, not simply an Islamic obligation but also the only effective check against the onslaught of Hindu militancy, in particular the aggressive *shuddhi* movement launched by the Hindu revivalist Arya Samaj in 1923 to convert Muslims and other non-Hindus to 'Hinduism'.

It is against this backdrop of a deep concern for the future of Islam and the political fate of Muslims in a Hindu-dominated India increasingly moving towards independence from British rule that Nizami's attempt to prove that Nanak was actually a Muslim must be viewed. Published probably in late 1922 or early 1923, this slim book, *Sikh Qaum aur Uske Bani ke Nisbat Mussalmano ki Muhabbat*

Amez Rai ('The Love-filled Views of Muslims about the Sikh Community and its Founder') was directed at both a Muslim as well as a Sikh readership, seeking to convince both of the fundamental unity of Islam and

Sikhism. Aware that the motives behind his writing of such a book might be suspect, he hastened to declare early in his Introduction that it was a work simply of "love of the heart" (*dilli muhabbat*) and that it had nothing to do with political or personal interests (Nizami, *Sikh Qaum*). Given the surcharged political climate in which this work was written, Nizami's leading role in Muslim *tabligh* efforts as well as veiled references in this work itself to the political wisdom of a united Sikh-Muslim plank that he was proposing, this assertion may well be questioned. This should not, however, detract from what was obviously a deeply-held conviction on Nizami's part of the divine nature of Guru Nanak's mission and his closeness with Islam, reflecting a strand in Punjabi Sufi, particularly Chishtiyya, thought to which we referred above.

The tract under discussion is a collection of three of several articles that Nizami penned on the Sikh community. As its title suggests, it deals with broadly two aspects of the Sikh-Muslim relationship. Firstly, the nature and identity of the Sikh community of Nizami' s own time. Secondly, the message, teachings and personality of Guru Nanak. These two themes are not discussed separately or in any strictly coherent fashion. Rather, since Nizami's fundamental objective is to put forward the claim that since the teachings of Baba Nanak and the doctrines of the Sikhs are in basic conformity with Islam, Sikhs are actually Muslims, he simply draws parallels between the two peoples and the two religions to prove his point.

Nizami's description of the Sikh community is particularly interesting. In listing and describing what he sees as the basic traits of the Sikhs, he seeks to

establish that the Sikhs are certainly not Hindus in their beliefs and practices. Furthermore, in this explication of Sikh community traits he is at pains to stress how similar, if not identical, they are with the Muslims, thereby seeking to suggest a fundamental unity between Sikhism and Islam. Nizami probably hoped that this exposition of Sikhism would fall on receptive ears and that the Sikhs would themselves begin to realise that they had far more in common with Muslims than with the Hindus. Indeed, he had cause for such optimism, for the period in which he was writing witnessed a marked upsurge under the leadership of Sikh reformers to purge the community of such Hinduistic practices as idolatry, in addition to the powerful Singh Sabha movement to rid the Sikh *gurudwaras* of Brahmin priests who, over time, had managed to gain control over them and the vast properties that they owned. In this climate of a heightened Sikh identity consciousness wherein communal boundaries between Sikhs and Hindus were being sharply redrawn, Nizami believed that the Sikhs would be more receptive to appeals for building bridges with the Muslims than before.

Nizami's portrayal of the Sikh community could hardly be less flattering. "Their religion," he writes, "is almost identical with Islam because they regard God as One and without any partners." In matters of prayer and ritual observance, too, Sikhs and Muslims, he says, are very similar. Both place great importance on prayers during nightly vigils and on the recitation of their scriptures early in the mornings. Like the Muslims, and in sharp contrast to the Hindus, the Sikhs shun the worship of idols, multiple gods and goddesses, holy seasons and the elements of nature, and do not include any other in the person (*zat*) and attributes (*sifat*) of God. Like the Muslims, they, too, revere a book, the Guru Granth Sahib. Their shrines are like Sufi hospices, for the very word *gurudwara* means 'the neighbourhood of the Sufi *shaykh'* (*pir ka pados, murshid ka hamsaya*) and 'the court of the Rightly- Guided One' (*hadi ka vas\sal khana*). Both groups view battle in the same light—as a struggle for truth. Dying on the battlefield is believed to earn martyrdom for both. Both are staunch upholders of

human equality. Both have a deep and abiding sense of self-respect. Both refuse to bow down meekly before powerful tyrants. Both are true to their word and 'walk erect with their heads held high like true soldiers'. Both get 'quickly emotionally worked up'. Both are non-vegetarians and abstain from intoxicants. Both wear turbans and grow beards.

In a chapter called "Sikhs and Sayyeds," Nizami points to what he sees as the similarities between the Sikhs and the Sayyeds, the direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad generally held in high regard by Muslims. By thus comparing the Sikhs with the Sayyeds, Nizami is at pains to project a glowing image of the former. Just as the Sayyeds are known for their generosity, bravery and firm championing of the cause of justice and truth, so, too, are the Sikhs. Like Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet, who gave up his life but refused to bow down before tyrannical rulers, the Sikhs, too, "have sacrificed the lives of their children for upholding the Truth and have never turned away

from the Straight Path." Thus, just as the Sayyeds are the *sardars* ('leaders') of the Muslims, the Sikhs, who are also respectfully called *sardars*, are the Sayyeds (chiefs) of the Indian peoples (*hindustani aqwam*). Most importantly, the most striking similarity between the two is their strict adherence to monotheism (*aqida-i-tauhid*). The only difference between the Sayyeds and the Sikhs is, Nizami says, that "while the Sayyeds use their title of Sayyed before their name, the Sikh attach the title Singh ('lion') after their names."

What is particularly remarkable in this assertion of the justice of the historical Sikh struggle against tyranny is a sharp critique of later Mughal policies towards the Sikh Gurus that sowed the seeds of bitter hatred between the Sikhs and the Muslims in the Punjab. Thus, according to Nizami, God Himself is with the Sikhs, having made them a strong and brave community and fitted them with noble

qualities. They are, in fact, "God's special servants" upon whom "He has showered all his blessings", and Nizami calls upon others to respect them because, "it is the will of God" that the Sikhs "should be the cause of the happiness of all the people of India" and a "guiding light" to deliver them from the throes of darkness. The Sikhs, indeed, are "the servants of the poor," ever ready with swords in their hands to combat the Satanic ego (*nafs-i-shaytani*).

Turning to what apparently distinguishes Sikhs from Muslims and brings them closer to the Hindus, Nizami lists three points: their adherence to certain caste rules of purity, pollution and untouchability (*chhoot*) towards Muslims; their cremation of the dead; and their concern for the protection of the cow. He has three simple solutions to these barriers that stand between Sikhs and Muslims. He traces the problem of untouchability practised by Sikhs towards Muslims to the political wrangling of the past between Sikhs and certain Muslim rulers. If Muslims and Sikhs today were to sink their political differences the problem would immediately be solved, he writes. The cremation of the dead by the Sikhs, he notes, is simply a custom that they have borrowed from the Hindus and has nothing to do with the principles of their religion. And as for their reverence for the cow, this is something that the Sikhs have adopted from having been close to the Hindus. It has, apparently, no sanction in the Sikh religion which, Nizami says, is based on strict monotheism.

Given that their hearts (*dil*), deeds (*amal*), principles (*usul*) and qualities (*ausaf*) are 'the same', how long, Nizami asks, can the 'mere externalities of words' and the unfortunate politics of the past keep the two brothers, Sikhs and Muslims, apart? For their own sake as well as for the sake of India as a whole, he says, the two must now unite as one. Although Nizami admits that in the political sphere the Sikhs have been recognised as a separate community, for all

practical purposes, he claims, 'the Sikhs are in fact entirely Muslim' (*Hai Sikh bilkul Musalman*) and he prophesies the merger of the two peoples in the near future. This call for a merger of the Sikhs into the Muslim fold is, interestingly, a two-way process. If Sikhs are Muslims, says Nizami, then Muslims are also Sikhs. Here he quotes a Persian saying: "Neither he nor you are strangers to one another".

In addition to listing points of similarity between Sikhs and Muslims in order to prove his claim that the two are actually the same, Nizami devotes several pages to an appraisal of Baba Nanak and his teachings so as to show to his readers that he was actually a divinely-guided Sufi. The honorific titles he uses for Baba Nanak are those usually reserved for guided Sufis. Thus, Baba Nanak is described as a "world renouncing mendicant" (*tark-i-duniya faqir*) (4), a "true friend of the true God" (*sacche khuda ka saccha wali*), an "ocean of monotheism" (*tauhid ka samundar*), the "herald of the Truth" (*haqqaniyat ki tuti*) and a "true missionary" (*sacche dai*) of the Oneness of God. Indeed, it is Baba Baba Nanak's uncompromising monotheism alone that is enough for Nizami to prove him to have been a devout Muslim. It is Baba Nanak's overpowering sense of surrender to the one God, going beyond the mere externalities of ritual and law that allows Nanak to be included in the ranks of the exalted Muslim mystics who have attained a true understanding of *wahdat al-wujud* (the unity of existence).

In the last of the three articles included in the tract, titled *Nanaki Quam Mai Wahdat* ('Unity in the Community of Nanak'), Nizami's elaborate exposition of the Sufistic teachings of Baba Nanak takes the form of an imaginary conversation between the eyelashes of a seeker after the Truth and the long tresses of the Baba. After a great many solemn oaths Nizami pronounces that Baba Nanak was indeed a "true seer" (*ankho wale*). Unlike ordinary mortals who depend on their

external senses, he could see the hidden realities of the world through his 'inner eye'. Not every person is fortunate enough to possess the inner eye, and Baba Nanak, says Nizami, was one of those chosen few of God. His inner eye was, in fact, a "fire chamber" (*atish khana*), a "cannon house" (*topkhana*) for the destruction of the "urgings of the Devil" (*jazbat-i-shaytani*), more powerful than the most deadly of "German cannons" because with it he would conquer the "forts of hearts" (*dil ke qile*) and not merely "forts of mud". When Baba Nanak's inner eye was provoked into agitation it would destroy all the "ships of pride and sinfulness".

In conjunction with this *jalali* (majestic or wrathful) side to Nanak's inner eye are the more gentle or *jamali* attributes characteristic of the more sober Sufis. Thus, Nizami also describes it as an "ocean of pearls" and the "ball of the sun" which clearly reflects the "tranquility of the entire cosmos." It possesses a magical charm that "causes people to lose sense of their own selves, granting peace and solace to all troubled souls".

While Baba Nanak's uncompromising monotheism is itself not in doubt, his position on the finality of the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad is not actually clear. Indeed, earlier in his tract Nizami notes that while on the issue of monotheism Sikhs are "exactly the same" as Muslims, the former do not regard the Prophet Muhammad in the same manner as the latter do. However, since Nizami's objective is to press the claim that Nanak was himself not simply a pious monotheist but actually a Muslim in the fullest sense of the term, including in recognising the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad, he introduces into this rich tapestry of mystical symbolism and metaphor woven around the person of Guru Nanak the well-known Sufi concept of the "light of Muhammad" (*nur-i-muhammadi*). Thus, he writes, Nanak was actually the "star of the eye of God"

through which "the light of Muhammad" brilliantly shone. This is why, like the Prophet, he refused to worship anyone else but God, destroyed all "germs of ignorance" (*jarasim-i-jahaliyat*) and "saw every particle of God's creation" with the "eye of monotheism" (*nazar-i-tauhid*).

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With Guru Nanak having been a vehicle for transmitting the "light of Muhammad" to the world, it is but natural that he should also have reflected the Prophet's attributes and qualities. Like the Prophet, Baba Nanak, too, says Nizami, stressed love for the poor, piety, worship, and the performance of good deeds while remaining involved with the world instead of renouncing it. This similarity extended even to matters of external appearance. Like other "friends of God", such as the Prophet himself, Imam Ali, Imam Hussain and all the other great leaders of Islam, as well as Jesus and even Zoroaster and the heroes of the Greeks, Nanak "grew his hair long". Having argued that Baba Nanak was a devoted disciple of the Prophet and a perfect guide to the "path of the Lord", Nizami exclaims in exultant praise, addressing Baba Nanak thus:

> "[N]ow, tell us, how can we convince those fools who have gone astray who condemn your pure and straight path (*tariqat*) and wag their tongues in calumny against your happiness-filled Sikh path? You are true, your words are true, your eyes are true and so is whatever it sees. All the rest is false".

Having 'proved' Nanak to be a devout follower of Islam and the Sikhs to be identical to Muslims, Nizami calls upon both peoples to "cut down and throwaway the branches of duality" (*dui ki shakho ko kat kar phenk de*). They both must now recognise that "Sikhs are Muslims and Muslims are Sikhs". Interestingly, Nizami

does not plead simply for a complete absorption or conversion of the Sikhs into the Muslim fold. In fact, implicit in his argument is a call for a radical redefinition of Muslim identity *vis-a-vis* the Sikh 'Other'. Thus, not only must Sikhs recognize their links with Islam and Muslims, but, since Nizami claims to have shown Baba Nanak to have been a true servant of God, Muslims, too, must recognize the Sikh scripture, the Granth Sahib, as the "heart and life" (*dil-o-jan*) of India, the "brilliantly shining sun" whose guards (*pasban*) all Muslims should consider themselves to be. Muslims, as well as others, must also recognise Baba Nanak as a devout bondsman of God and a guide to His path, holding on to his long "tresses of love" (*ishq ki zulfe*), entangling their hearts in its knots to attain to the Truth. The 'favourite slogan' of all India should now be the Sikh (hence, in Nizami's eyes, Muslim) cry of monotheistic confession: "*Sri Wahe Guruji ka Khalisa, Sri Wahe Guruji ki Fateh, Sat Sri Akal*! (Hail to the Pure Ones of God! Hail to the Victorious Ones of God! Hail to the Timeless One!)".This, says Nizami, is nothing but the slogan *Haq Allah* ('Allah is the Truth') that love-filled Sufis cry out in moments of ecstatic surrender.

Writing from within the Indian Chishti Sufi tradition known for its tolerance and breath of vision, Nizami offers Muslims, Sikhs as well as others a way to think beyond narrow, traditional barriers of community and mere externalities of ritual and form in a search for the Universal Spirit that Sufis have often discovered in spiritual traditions other than their own. While the political motives behind the penning of his tract on Sikhism cannot be discounted, Nizami's quest for refashioning established community identities and building bridges between spiritual traditions provides a valuable lesson for contemporary efforts at inter religious dialogue and understanding.

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