The Rādhāsoāmī Theory of Subtle Body as an Expression of Religious Inclusivism

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Abstract This article looks at the yogic theory of subtle body as a hermeneutical and pedagogical tool used by the Rādhāsoāmī (rādhāsvāmī) tradition to construct an inclusivist strategy for appropriating other religious systems. When constructing the theory of surat-śabd-yoga, the Rādhāsoāmīs took the haṭha yoga of the Nāths as a vital reference point. While rejecting the corporeal techniques of haṭha yoga, they remained influenced by the Nāth theory of subtle body. A thorough modification and expansion of this theory enabled the Rādhāsoāmīs to construct a historiosophy based on a hierarchy of religious paths. The article discloses various manifestations of the inclusivist strategy in Rādhāsoāmī thought, establishes its historical and structural determinants, and examines the process of development of the theory of subtle body into a hermeneutical tool for interpreting rival paradigms of yoga in a manner that portrays them as inferior.

Keywords Rādhāsoāmī · Nāth · inclusivism · subtle body · surat-śabd-yoga · haṭha yoga

Introduction: Inclusivism and the Rādhāsoāmī Tradition

At first the teachings of Rādhāsoāmīs (rādhāsvāmī) appear to be suffused with a spirit of tolerance and openness towards other religions. However, closer examination reveals their approach to be a form of inclusivism. The term “Inklusivismus” was introduced to Indological studies in 1957 by Paul Hacker, who saw it as a specifically Indian way of dealing with religious traditions other than one’s own. Hacker defines inclusivism as claiming, and eventually incorporating in...
one’s religion, an element that belongs to a different religious tradition. In his view, the inclusivist strategy of negotiating between the alien and the known combines both doctrinal tolerance and intolerance. In this strategy, other religious traditions are subordinated by being presented as incomplete versions of “the truth” which is fully realized in one’s own tradition. Such inclusion may result in the identity of the incorporated religious tradition being either erased or sustained (Halbfass 1988: 404–8, 413–17).

The Rādhāśoāmī approach fully complies with the notion of Inklusivismus. It sees other religious paths as valid, but nonexhaustive manifestations of religious truth, while at the same time considering itself the sole and unmistakable path to the ultimate goal. According to this view, other religions might display some salvific notions and useful practices, but they are ultimately flawed and can be considered valuable only as minor expressions of the one truth. The Rādhāśoāmīs perceive their religion as “the path of the saints,” that provides a true interpretation of the views of different religious figures from diverse backgrounds, and as a “science of the soul,” that is able to unify a scientific approach to human consciousness with the religious discourse on the immortal soul striving for liberation through faith, worship, and yoga. Moreover, they consider their particular practice to be the one that brings all the benefits of existing types of yoga (rāja yoga, hātha yoga), without entailing the type of physical and mental hardship that may be beyond the reach of individuals living in the present era of downfall (kali yuga).

In this article, I will try to show how the theory of subtle body, described in the theoretical framework of Rādhāśoāmī surat-śabd-yoga, was utilized to suit an inclusivist position, and subsequently employed as a hermeneutical tool for rereading past and present religious traditions in order to present the Rādhāśoāmī as the supreme religion. As far as the theory of subtle body is concerned, the Rādhāśoāmīs, just like all Sants, are heirs to the Nāth tradition and their version of hātha yoga. However, through a series of structural modifications, they were able to break free from the constraints of the past and introduce a theory of subtle body well fitted to an inclusivist position. This process entailed creating a new model of practice, which was subsequently promulgated as the most efficient of all the forms of yoga. A comparative analysis of Nāth and Rādhāśoāmī sources reveals deep historical and structural ties, which show that surat-śabd-yoga was formed with hātha yoga as the decisive point of reference. This is visible as far as the method of Rādhāśoāmī yoga is based on the general model of sending a vital principle upwards through the energy centers of the subtle body. However, while similar in its basic mechanics, surat-śabd-yoga is nevertheless designed to exceed hātha yoga in terms of accessibility and efficiency. In this manner, it fulfills the inclusive model which lies at its foundations.

1 See Puri 2007: 263–65. Science of the Soul is the title of a book (published in 1959, revised and enlarged in 1972) by Jagat Singh (1884–1951), one of the Rādhāśoāmī masters from Beas, and also a self-describing phrase used by the Rādhā Śoāmī Satsaṅg Beas (see: https://www.rssb.org/; accessed November 15, 2019).
Major Expressions of Inclusivism in the Rādhāsoāmī Teachings

The Rādhāsoāmī inclusivist tendency first becomes visible when one looks at the historical facts pertaining to the succession of teachers. The Punjab offshoot of the Rādhāsoāmīs, established by Jaimal Singh (1839–1903) in Beas, considers the founder of the Rādhāsoāmī tradition, Shiv Dayāl Singh (1818–1878), also known as Soāmījī Mahārāj, to be one of a line of satgurus, that constitute a broader tradition of holy men (sant),\(^2\) having its origins in the medieval figures of mystics and poets such as Kabīr (ca. 1450–1518) and Nānak (1469–1539). The Beas tradition claims that Dayāl Singh inherited the Sant teachings from Tulsī Śāhīb of Hathras (1763–1843), the author of Ghaṭ Rāmāyana, a complex encyclopedic work that presents a particular strain of late Sant thought, described by scholars as “ultraist” (Barthwal 1936) and “esoteric” (Gold 1987; Juergensmeyer 1991). One of the Punjab masters, the founder of Ruḥānī Satsang, Kirpal Singh (1894–1974), even went so far as suggesting a direct link between Rādhāsoāmīs and the lineage of Sikh gurus by stating that Tulsī was a disciple of one of Gobind Singh’s disciples (Babb 1986: 20).

While this view might be a little too extreme for the Beas Rādhāsoāmīs, they would surely support the notion that it is essential to inherit true knowledge from a living master. The inclusivist stance of the Beas group is also manifested in their acknowledgment of figures such as Jesus and Buddha, as predecessors of their current gurus (Juergensmeyer 1991: 20). Thus, even at the level of constructing a diachronic model of this tradition, the Beas group seems to include the broadest possible array of spiritual authorities. Such an understanding of the history of important teachers and their role in inspiring the beginnings of the movement was, however, disputed by two Rādhāsoāmī communities located in the Agra colonies of Soāmibagh and Dayalbagh. They argued that Soāmījī was a personality of unique character and his teachings, while based on the doctrines of the past Sants, constitute in fact an entirely new religious movement (Juergensmeyer 1991: 20–21; Gold 1987: 109–10).

The broadest exemplification of the inclusivist stance of the Rādhāsoāmīs may be observed in the writings of spiritual masters of the tradition. One such example is Kirpal Singh (1975: 31–33), who, in a “manual” for the practitioners of surat-śabd-yoga, supports his claims by citing extensively from sources that reach far beyond the Sant milieu. While trying to explicate that his method of practice is devoid of the errors and restrictions that limit karma, jñāna, and bhakti yogas, he maintains that surat-śabd-yoga exceeds all other systems, as it is intimately connected with the principle of the word (śabd)—a force of primal creation. In order to prove that this principle is unequivocally accepted in different religious traditions, Kirpal Singh utilizes fragments, not only from Nānak, the Ṣūfī masters, and the Nādabindu Upaniṣad, but also from the Gospel of St. John (1:1). He further points to Zoroastrian and Daoist traditions and gives Arabic, Persian, Hindi, and Sanskrit equivalents of the term logos. This shows that, for Kirpal Singh, terms expressed in

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\(^2\) A common mistranslation of this term in the Rādhāsoāmī literature is “saint,” whereas the word sant comes from the Sanskrit sat (“existing,” “true”), which makes a Sant “someone who knows the (ultimate) truth” (Callewaert 2011: 532).
different languages and coined in different cultural contexts can be equated on the basis of what they denote. It would also seem that the thing they are alluding to—which must be nothing other than the ultimate truth—is of a universal character. Moreover, Kirpāl Singh believes that all the terms he enumerates are not of a metaphorical nor figurative character, but have an original “mystical meaning.” Therefore, it can be inferred that this meaning is to be revealed through a mystical experience that must also be of a universal character.

Such reasoning is based on the assumption that there exists only one religious truth, differently interpreted by various traditions in diverse cultural contexts, and that the many paths leading to its disclosure all have a mystical core. Therefore, the Rādhāsoāmī position can be coordinated with the perennial model of approaching religion and its experiential aspects. According to this view, mystical experience is at the center of any method attempting to reach the variously defined, but ultimately single, absolute truth (Forman 1990: 3–4). However, in the case of the Rādhāsoāmīs, this position is mediated by the notion of inclusivism. In order to understand how these two ideas impact each other, it must be observed that the perennial—and thus potentially tolerant stance of the Rādhāsoāmīs—on the one hand nurtures their inclusivist position, but on the other becomes (eventually) overwhelmed by it. This enables different or even conflicting religious traditions to be assigned to one category of systems that aim at the definitive truth, but at the same time allows for an attempt to persist in presenting a clear assessment of methods that—although rooted in the mystical ethos—clearly fall into different categories according to their efficacy. For that reason, the potentially pluralist position emerging from perennialism (one goal through different but equal mystical approaches) is here undermined by a strong insistence on the effectiveness of one method that turns out to be more “mystical” than the others (one goal through one correct approach). Therefore, while the Rādhāsoāmīs do not rule out other yogic methods, they treat them as imperfect and inadequate ways that “point in the right direction,” which for various reason are too flawed to lead anyone to the ultimate truth. They validate this claim by maintaining that older, more difficult methods of yoga are not useful in kali yuga—the era that calls for simplified ways of achieving salvation. Such an approach represents in fact not pluralism, but rather inclusivism, that denies the ultimate value of alien ideas and methods, simultaneously validating them as being partially correct.

The perennial notion of the universality of ideas and methods resonates strongly in Lekh Raj Puri’s (2007) introduction to the main tenets of the Rādhāsoāmī doctrine. Puri—writing from the perspective of the Beas group—insists that surat-śabd-yoga, as a continuation of the doctrine of the Sants (santmat), is above all a spiritual method transcending all external characteristics and practices that are at the core of every institutionalized religion. According to Puri, Soāmīji did not start a new religious order, nor did his intention lie in “destroying old religions.” As a mystic par excellence, he concentrated his efforts on transmitting the eternal “spiritual science” and the “universal and natural” method of surat-śabd-yoga. Furthermore, this method of the “transcendent word” (śabd) had been taught by all of the “saints” including Christ (Puri 2007: 16–19), and as such constitutes the truly spiritual practice at the core of all paths to salvation, while the religious traditions of
Sikhism, Kabirpanthi, and Christianity are only social constructs based on particular interpretations of one mystical truth.

Puri’s attitude, up to this point, might present itself as almost pluralistic, but its inclusivist aspect is revealed in a rhetorical question. All the teachings of true Sants have—to use a Buddhist metaphor—the same (salvific) flavor, but, looking at them through the prism of various religious traditions, one can easily miss their true, mystical meaning. While the core message of the “spiritual science” of the “saints” remains always the same (a perennial view), there exists only one supreme method that can be used to disclose and realize the truth contained in the teachings of Nanak, Kabir, and Christ (an inclusivist position). “Who really understands their teachings?” asks the author (Puri 2007: 19), as if to suggest that only his own tradition possesses the key to unlock the message of the Christian apostles, or indeed of any other religious figure that has ever formulated his or her teachings in a way resembling that of the Radha-soamis and the Sants. This becomes apparent later, when Puri (2007: 35–40)—quoting from Shiv Dayal Singh’s verses in Sārb Bacan—establishes surat-śabd-yoga as the sole practice leading to liberation. Even if we bear in mind that, in the Beas group, the theory of yoga is interpreted as emerging from an older Sant tradition, all Radha-soamis consider surat-śabd-yoga the easiest and most up to date form of practice, best suited for our times. To give even more eloquent examples of the inclusivist stance of the Radha-soamis, we must now turn to the root texts authored by Soamiji.

Cosmology as a Basis for the Inclusivist Model

Sārb Bacan (Essential Teachings) is the primary source for all branches of the Radha-soami tradition. Its main part consists of a voluminous collection of verses (śabd) in Hindi that was originally published in 1884 as Sārbcanc rādhāśvāmī, chand band (commonly referred to as Sārb Bacan Poetry; Singh 1921). Appearing also in the same year was a volume containing the transcribed discourses of Shiv Dayal Singh, Sārbcanc rādhāśvāmī, vārtik (Sārb Bacan Prose; Singh 2013). Both collections were edited by Rāi Sāligrām (1829–1898) (also known as Huzür Mahāra), the second master in the Radha-soami lineage, and published under the “joint authority” of Sāligrām and Dayal Singh’s younger brother Lālā Pratāp Singh Seth (Singh 1970: 6). These publications mark the beginning of the Radha-soami textual tradition (Babb 1986: 23–24). While there are some differences between the Agra and Beas editions pertaining to the more sensitive issues (for example, the succession of masters), the Bacans are, for the most part, compatible and equally venerated by all Radha-soami groups.

These collections supply us with numerous examples of strategies used to place this tradition as the ultimate expression of the mystical core of every religion. The system of evaluating other traditions, presented in the Bacans, is based upon something I would like to call “a vertical scheme of value.” While retaining some level of acceptance of other Indian traditions, the Bacans use this evaluative scheme not to create a platform for dialogue, but to subjugate these traditions by locating them invariably at lower levels of excellence.
The concept of a vertical scheme of value is built on a cosmological model, according to which the higher strata of the universe are of a subtle (sūkṣma) nature, while the lower ones are coarse (sthūl). That which is subtle or spiritual moves upwards, while the coarse and material (jar) tend downwards. This general principle governs the whole Rādhāśoāṁī doctrine and has a crucial meaning for the theory of self, which in turn is intimately connected to the idea of subtle body. The subtle self (surat) was originally a part (amsa) of the Supreme Being (rādhāsvāṁī), but at some point it got separated, descended to the lower material realm, and was caught in the cycle of transmigration (caurāśī), thus forgetting its place of origin and its true identity (Babb 1986: 35–40). The main task of human beings is to find a way back home, which means performing surat-śabd-yoga in order to reunite the soul with śabd—the creative energy of the Supreme Being that gave rise to the whole universe. The upward path of the surat—a dominant theme in the Bacans—means climbing up to the higher regions (muqām) of the universe, but above all it entails the notion of raising the soul through “inner regions” of the body that are in correspondence with the (macro)cosmic levels. In reality, these regions correspond to the “energy centers” (cakra) of the subtle body, and one can safely posit that the upward “journey” of the surat is analogous to the raising of the seminal substance (bindu) in early hatha yoga as well as to the raising of the vital energy of kuṇḍalinī in later hatha yoga and in forms of yogas belonging to the Tantric path (for example, Kaula kuṇḍalinī yoga). We shall return to this matter on the following pages.

The micro- and macrocosmological scheme is built on the assumption that the purification process of the soul always proceeds from the coarse, being “down here,” to the subtle, being “up there” (Babb 1986: 37). Therefore, Soāṁijī proposes a theory in which the stratification of values, ideas, and methods depends on the proximity to the sacred—that is, the Supreme Being, who occupies the highest position and is the subtlest of all substances. The paradigm for an inclusive strategy, based on such a model, is well demonstrated in the Bacans. In Sār Bacan Prose 1.3, it is stated that various religious figures of the past (ācāryas, mahātmās, avatāras, and paigambars [prophets]) strived for the one ultimate goal, but that all of them failed. A purely exclusivist position would refuse to acknowledge them with any kind of achievement, but here they are credited with having made some progress: it is said they have attained the lower levels of the universe. The higher ones (satlok, the final abode of surat, and the Supreme Being [rādhāsvāṁī dhām]) are only within the reach of true Sants. Here we can observe that, in the vertical scheme of value, based upon the hierarchization of spiritual “regions,” “higher” always means “better.” Such an order of things is used to subordinate alien religious traditions; however, this is not done by entirely denying their merit, but rather by including their partial achievements into a grander scheme of things. This is clearly visible in Sār Bacan Prose 1.3 and 1.5, when Soāṁijī attributes the initiation of various religious paths to the aforementioned individuals. These figures took the guardian gods of the “planes” they had managed to reach as ultimate deities and began

3 The first Hindu numeral stands for one of the two chapters of Sār Bacan Prose, and the second, Hindu numeral stands for the paragraph number.
worshiping them. Of course, only Sants were able to reach higher and discover the utmost “regions.” The greatest of them was Soāmījī himself, who arrived at the highest and remotest (dhur) “sphere” of rādhāsvāmī—“the beginning and origin of everything and the real abode of supreme (param) Sants” (Sār Bacan Prose 1.7).4

One of the most important features of the vertical scheme of value is the inclusion of various abstract philosophical ideas, as well as Hindu gods and saints, at particular levels of the cosmic ladder. The best example of this is Sār Bacan Prose 1.11–26, where a detailed account of inner spiritual regions is given. The utmost of them, rādhāsvāmī dhām, is the source of surat and śabd. The region of satlok is the origin of the whole of creation, while puruṣa and prakṛti come from the region of sunn (“emptiness”)/dasvān dvār (the “tenth door”). The sphere of trikuṭi (“three peaks”) is seen as the source of three guṇas (qualities), five tattvas (elements), śakti, and māyā. It is also the seat of brahmāṇḍī man, the “universal mind” (brahm, paramātmā).5 Vedas, Purāṇas, and the Qurān also come from this “place.” The next level is called sahasdal kamval (a “thousand-petaled lotus”) and is the source of all jogīs (who did not practice surat-śabd-yoga). It is also the origin of the tannātrās (“subtle elements”), tattvas, indriyas (senses), and their organs and of the energy of breathing (prān). The sahasdal kamval constitutes the lowest of the spiritual regions. Below is the sphere of piṇḍa, the physical body of six cakras. The dodal kamval (“two-petaled lotus”) or tīrā til (“third eye”⁻; ājñā cakra) is located behind the eyes. It is the seat of surat and the place of origin of some prophets, avatāras, siddhas, and lower ranking jogīs. Next is the throat cakra (kaṇṭh, viśuddha), the home of a phenomenal form of God and the resting place of the breath (prān). The heart cakra (hrday, anāhata) is the location of the individual mind (piṇḍī man). The navel cakra (nābhi, maniḥpūra) is the residence (vāsā) of Viṣṇu and Laksṇi, while Brahma and Ganeśa are located, respectively, at the center of the reproductive organs (indri, svādhīṣṭhāna) and at the base of the spine (mūlādhāra) or rectum (gūḍā).

In this almost self-explanatory scheme, we see that certain ideas, religious figures, and even deities are acknowledged as valid, but only as minor expressions of the universal truth. At the same time, this one truth is confirmed as being, almost literally, out of reach for those not committed to santmat. This point is best illustrated by relegating Hindu gods as guardians of the lower energy points. According to Sār Bacan Prose, “Today it has become very difficult to master even the ‘lotuses’ (kamval) of heart and navel, because nobody can perform the practice (abhyāśa) of prāṇāyām and mudrā” (1.34). Yet, even those who have mastered these techniques are confused, because they mistake their partial successes for the final accomplishment and take the gods of the lower cakras as the highest deities (1.52). Of course, it is only the Sants who are able to determine where the path ends, because only they have penetrated far enough to know all its stages. They know that

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4 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
5 This concept is probably a reference to the Upaniṣadic and Vedāntic Brahman. However, in Rādhāsoāmī thought, the mind (universal and individual) is not an object of knowledge, but a principle binding the soul to cyclic existence. Therefore, the goal of the practice is to transcend the mind’s limitations by escaping the physical world (Sār Bacan Prose 1.8). On the mind as enemy, see Sār Bacan Poetry 19.2.
the Hindu gods are only temporary incarnations of the Highest Being, which constitutes their “real form” (nij rūp). Meditating on this form may be of some avail, but worship of incarnations is useless (1.49). Such a practice may have an effect of attaining a particular heaven after death, but not of ending the cycle of caurāśī (1.57). However, “one should not cultivate hostility and envy towards rulers (mālik) [of the lower regions],” because at some point in the practice, they must become objects of contemplation (1.50). Thus, the worship of gods is considered a lower expression of the proper worship advocated by the Sants. Here, knowledge of the hierarchy is also of key importance. The progress on the path relies (among other things) on recognizing and upholding a scheme of merit, in which that which occupies a higher position is always of greater value.

The Rādhāsoāmī view is a continuation of the longstanding Sant distrust of traditional Hindu worship. Simultaneously they aspire to universality, and this forces them to consider some conventional forms of worship as part of religious growth. These, ultimately misguided, acts of devotion are included in an evaluative scheme that (on the surface level) seems to allow a gradual, manifold path to liberation, but in reality emphasizes a single system of practice.

**Surat-Śabd-Yoga as the Ultimate Method of Reaching Universal Truth**

The evaluative inclusive strategy of the Rādhāsoāmīs is consistently applied to the various forms of yogic practice. All components of this strategy are apparent in a single paragraph from Sār Bacan Prose (1.33). Shiv Dayāl Singh asserts that because older forms of yoga impel the practitioner to begin his or her task from the lowest cakras, they are difficult, time consuming, and ineffective. But Sants have introduced—in the place of aṣṭānga yoga—that is, the prānāyām, in which one has to stop the breath—a practice [that starts] from sahasdal kamvāl. They established an easy and natural yoga (sahaja yoga), or surat-śabd-mārg, which anyone can practice. The benefit gained from it is much greater than from prānāyām, mudra, haṭha [yoga], etc. Besides, the fruits of all those practices are acquired during the practice of surat-śabd-mārg.

This crucial passage presents the Rādhāsoāmī yoga as a simple yet efficient method that is overtly inclusive in character. In this regard, the remark about initiating this sahaja yoga where competing practices conclude their efforts is of special importance. It attests to this yoga’s superiority and renders it as the most appropriate for the age of corruption, in which people have diminished spiritual capacities. In spite of this, modern yogīs are still unable to make any progress without spiritual guidance; therefore, Sants—ranking higher than other religious teachers, holy scriptures (including the Vedas), and even gods (Sār Bacan Prose 1.68, 2.34)—have a special importance in kali yuga. They appear as “rulers” (bādšāh) of this era; they come to rescue souls from kali yuga and teach the futility of following the sāstras and Vedas (2.181). Only those who follow them can attain the highest spiritual goals (2.212). In short, the only way for people to open the “tenth door” (dasvān dvār) and reach the purely spiritual “regions” in kali yuga is through devotion to a Sant guru (who is not a human being, but the Lord himself
Sār Bacan Poetry [18.12.3]6) and through the practice of surat-śabd-yoga (Sār Bacan Prose 2.59, 2.121). The exclusive salvific potential of this yoga is strongly emphasized in the Bacans. It is said to give meaning to life (Sār Bacan Poetry 9.1.8). Apart from this, all efforts are worthless (9.5). Only through this form of yoga can one control the mind, bestow peace upon it (9.9.9–13), and achieve bliss (9.5.5). As Soāmījī himself cautions: “I say this over and over again: there is no other practice than śabd” (24.1.103).

Even if the above examples establish the hegemony of one correct practice, the Bacans do allow a gradual, multilayered approach, provided that it is based on an unshakable hierarchy. A good example is provided by Sār Bacan Poetry 26.1.64–71, where we come across a classification of methods leading towards the highest goal. The lowest position is occupied by those who learn from books, theorize, and preach without practicing yoga (jog binā). They are full of pride, which causes them to be reborn in hell (jampur). Their methods fail to fathom the knowledge of “the drop” (bund).7 On the other hand, the jogeśvars, who perform prāṇa yoga, are able to ascend to the seat of the essence of bund, which lies beyond the “region” of trikuṭī. But, as they lack guidance from a true guru, they cannot gain higher knowledge. However, for those who are instructed by a Sant teacher and engage in surat-śabd-yoga, the way to the abode of Rādhāsoāmī lies open.

A similar example of the hierarchy of methods is to be found in Sār Bacan Prose 1.34. Here we see three systems of practice. The lowest is the way of external (bāharmukh) worship: pilgrimages, fasts, and reverence of idols. The classic yoga techniques of concentrating on the six cakras and on inner worship (antarmukh pūjā) rank a bit higher. Nevertheless, those who are engaged in such activities are guilty of mistaking their partial achievements for the highest goal. For Shiv Dayāl Singh, the aim of penetrating the bodily cakras ranks only as a minor accomplishment and is to be replaced by the highest of all religious practices—surat-śabd-yoga that starts off where other forms of yoga finish (sahasrāra cakra) and aspires higher through a new set of “regions” or “spheres” which represent a new set of cakras—a system built over the traditional yogic scheme. The most important feature of this new system, and at the same time a clear exemplification of the inclusivist stance of the Rādhāsoāmī tradition, is the placing of the sahasrāra (sahasadal kamval) cakra “above the eyes” (āṅkhom ke ṯpar) (1.26)8—that is, in the space occupied by the ājñā cakra in traditional schemes. By redirecting the highest energy point, usually located at the top of the cranium, to a lower position and marking it the starting point of a serious practice, the Rādhāsoāmīs make a bold statement. If the true yoga begins in the “thousand-petaled lotus” and if this center opens the path to spiritual realms, this must mean that the goal of surat-śabd-yoga transcends the states acknowledged by other forms of yoga. It may also indicate that

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6 The first Hindu numeral stands for the bacan (collection of poems) in Sār Bacan Poetry, the second, Hindu numeral stands for the śabd (a single poem), and finally, the third, Hindu numeral refers to the verse number.

7 A reference to the Tantric notion of semen (bindu). In Rādhāsoāmī thought, bund represents the creational force of the Supreme Being. According to Sār Bacan Poetry 26.1.45–51, bund—merged with māyā, the five tattvas, and the three guṇas—is responsible for the creation of the universe (triloka).

8 Compare Puri (2007: 185); Kaushal (1998: 97); Barthwal (1936: 156).
other forms of yoga can be included in the Rādhāsoāmī practice. Surat śabd yoga is thus seen not merely as an alternative method, but as yoga par excellence, fit for surpassing all other kinds of practice, just as the worship of a guru surpasses all other kinds of worship.

Much like Soāmiji, Kirpāl Singh also sees surat-śabd-yoga as a practice endowed with all the benefits of the traditional forms of yoga but free of their limitations. According to him, the aṣṭāṅga yoga of Patañjali was the original method of restraining the “mental oscillations” that obscure the mind, but it demanded lifelong dedication and had an elitist character. These drawbacks resulted in its division into particular techniques, which each became ends in themselves, eventually making it impossible to reach the final goal (Singh 1975: 18–21). The need to make yoga more accessible to the average person required the gradual development of simplified forms of practice: jñāna, karma, and bhakti forms of yoga. All of these, however, are encumbered with serious faults that render them ineffective. Jñāna yoga is only for the very few individuals with formidable intellectual capacities. Moreover, knowledge can become a burden, because it is impossible to transcend the jñāna one is based upon. Equally important is that knowledge is not of the nature of soul, and so it cannot grant access to it and venture beyond the domain of time (and death) (kāl). Karma yoga, while being the most accessible, has the drawback of generating attachment to the deeds from which it is supposed to free people. Not rooted in a mystical core, it is deemed as inefficacious. Bhakti yoga also has its limitations. The Rādhāsoāmīs are generally considered as proponents of bhakti, but they represent a nirguṇīc approach to the idea of the Absolute. This confronts them with the paradox of loving that which has no attributes. They solve this dilemma by channeling love towards a living guru, who is the only representation of the creational cosmic energy. The living guru is a proper recipient of devotion, but an imagined manifestation of the divine is not, because it cannot lead the practitioner out of the domain of the physical. Moreover, its attractive attributes ultimately become an object of attachment and prevent the adept from aspiring higher, impelling him or her to stop at a certain nonultimate level (Singh 1975: 23–27).

In the Rādhāsoāmī theory of yoga, all of the above methods are inscribed into an inclusive model, in which they serve merely as exemplars of lower modes of practice. And while surat-śabd-yoga has the elements of acquired knowledge, unselfish deed, and devotion, the forms of yoga mentioned above are treated not as its structural components, but rather as symbols of historical processes that fulfilled their role by bringing about the creation of the ultimate practice. For that reason, their role as factors influencing surat-śabd-yoga is rarely explained by the Rādhāsoāmī masters.

The importance of a diachronic perspective in approaching the yoga in question is apparent in Kirpāl Singh’s definition of meditative equipoise (samādhi). He understands it as a state of mind freed from the constraints of the physical, arising out of a “complex inner journey” with many “intermediate stages” that “may be mistaken for the final goal” (Singh 1975: 27). His attitude proves that, in such a gradual approach, it is of utmost importance to posit that practice should consist of clearly recognizable phases, but ultimately lead towards a goal impossible to be mistaken for a lower stage. It is obvious that the “intermediate stages” represent

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earlier practices, while the final goal is the highest truth as defined by the Radhasoami\textsuperscript{s}. It also follows that the many stages of yoga can only be elucidated by Sants who possess knowledge of the workings of the whole scheme.

In the final analysis, surat-\textit{sabd-yoga} presents itself as the “method of all methods,” retaining elements from older practices, but offering the crucial factors of simplicity, naturalness, and effectiveness. We can summarize its main features as follows. Designed especially for the \textit{kali yuga}, surat-\textit{sabd-yoga} is claimed to be truly a sahaja yoga, unlike the classical method of Patañjali and its immediate derivatives (for example, \textit{ha\textsuperscript{tha} yoga}). These qualities are warranted by the following structural features: (1) The living master provides guidance in the journey through complicated “layers” of “inner regions.” (2) The Rādhaśoāmī method is not based on conventional \textit{jñāna}, but on the power of the word that resonates from primal creation and constitutes the nature of the soul. (3) Because one can rely on the power of the word alone, the techniques needed to manipulate the subtle energies (\textit{prāṇa}, \textit{kundalinī}) and substances (\textit{bindu}) are not necessary. (4) But, most importantly, \textit{surat-sabd-yoga} is sahaja, because the redefinition of the subtle body’s structure allows the practice to start directly from the point above the eyes, named here as \textit{sahasrāra cakra}, to represent the supreme achievement of older forms of yoga.

The Rādhaśoāmī authors explain this last operation as mainly designed to simplify the practice, but I would like to point to a different reasoning based on the inclusive nature of the Rādhaśoāmī doctrine. If we suspend, for a moment, the assertions of the modern masters,\textsuperscript{9} we are left with the accounts of Shiv Dayāl Singh, who emphasized that Rādhaśoāmī yoga, while considerably easier than its counterparts, is still demanding and can be completed only by a few select Sants, whose accomplishments surpass those of the gods (\textit{Sār Baca\textsuperscript{n} Po\textsuperscript{e}try 28.2.9–15, 28.5.6–15}).\textsuperscript{10} Therefore, I would like to posit that for Soāmījī, as well as for his predecessor and guru, Tulśi Sāhib, the main rationale in displacing sahasdal \textit{kam\textit{val}} lay not in simplifying the practice, but in the subordination of other religious traditions in an inclusive model that is of central importance to Rādhaśoāmī historiosophy. For those two Sants, whom Pitambar Datta Barthwal called “ultraists obsessed with a sense of superiority” (1936: 147), it was of utmost importance to present a model of practice fit for the \textit{kali yuga}. They did this by cutting themselves off from all other forms of yoga, even those propounded by older generations of Sants. However, the operation of modifying the structure of subtle body was strongly rooted in the existing systems inherited from the Nāths, to which Sants had been indebted from the times of Kabīr. Therefore, it may be argued that the Rādhaśoāmī theory of spiritual “regions” is a reworking of the \textit{ha\textit{tha} yogic vision of the subtle body, as much as surat-\textit{sabd-yoga} is a “response” to Nāth \textit{ha\textit{tha} yoga}.

\textsuperscript{9} According to the Beas \textit{guru}, Sāwan Singh, \textit{surat-sabd-yoga} is so simple that “even a child of six can practice it” (Kaushal 1998: 101–2).
\textsuperscript{10} There are groups of religiously orientated people who should be excluded from attending Sant congregations (\textit{satsa\textsuperscript{ṅ}g}) and deprived of the possibility of practicing \textit{surat-sabd-yoga}. They include those committed to external rites (\textit{karmī}), adherents of Islamic \textit{Sharīa} (\textit{ṣara\textit{ī}}), intellectuals (\textit{jñānī}), followers of Vedānta (\textit{vedānī}), renunciants (\textit{sannyāsī}), and Sikhs from the Nirmal and Nihang orders (\textit{Sār Baca\textsuperscript{n} Po\textsuperscript{e}try 2.40}).
The Nāth subtle body theory served as the structural base for modifications by the later Sants, at the same time becoming a primary example of a lower type of yoga to be substituted with a new type of practice.

To justify the above claims, we shall now try to establish links between these two forms of yoga and, in a wider perspective, between the Sant and Nāth traditions. Our investigation will be based on two basic assumptions: (1) The displacement of the sahasrāra (sahasdal kaṃval) is, first and foremost, the result of the Rādhāsoāmī inclusivist strategy, dictated by the need for pedagogical efficiency, designed to strengthen the tradition’s position. (2) In the Rādhāsoāmī scheme, when the sahasrāra is relocated to the place of ājñā cakra, its functional equivalent is assigned to the topmost “region,” the rādhāsvāmī dhām.

**Haṭha Yoga and Surat-Śabd-Yoga: Historical and Structural Ties**

**The Legacy of Kabīr and Gorakhnāth**

When seeking proof of the relationship between the two systems of yoga, we need to start by establishing a historical frame of reference, and then look for structural similarities between the practices in question. This search must be based on the available knowledge of the relationship between the two (seemingly) historical figures of Gorakhnāth and Kabīr. Gorakhnāth is traditionally connected with the origins of haṭha yoga. There exists a considerable corpus of works on haṭha yoga, written in Sanskrit and old Hindi, ascribed to Gorakhnāth. In spite of this, the most recent scholarship ascribes the invention of haṭha yoga techniques to ascetics whose practices are continued nowadays in the Daśanāmī and Rāmānandī orders (Mallinson 2012a: 11–12). The earliest form of haṭha yoga—concerned with raising and preserving life energy in the form of semen (bindu)—was first systematically depicted in Dattātreya-yogaśāstra, a thirteenth-century work created outside the Nāth milieu. The yoga of Nāths—as elucidated in Gorakṣaśātaka (fifteenth century [Mallinson 2012b: 263]), Haṭhapradīpikā (fifteenth century), and Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati (eighteenth century [2011a: 424–25])—is in fact a revised and syncretic version of haṭha yoga (2011b: 771). In this, the earlier bindu-oriented haṭha practices were overlaid with techniques of laya yoga associated with the Tantric Kaula tradition, which formed an immediate background for Gorakhnāth and his guru Matsyendranāth. Therefore, in Haṭhapradīpikā—the first systematic work on this later form of haṭha yoga—we observe an attempt to reconcile the bindu-related methods with the techniques of raising the energy of kuṇḍalinī through the system of cakras (Mallinson 2011b: 770–71, 779–80). Even though the impact of Nāths on the origins of haṭha yoga is improbable (Mallinson 2012a: 11

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11 In the present discussion, the terms bindu and kuṇḍalinī are often juxtaposed not because they originally refer to the same system of practice or mean the same thing, but because, firstly, they are utilized together in the sources representing the syncretic haṭha yoga of the Nāths and, secondly, they represent the motif of an upward movement of a life principle, which is indispensable for the analysis of Sant and Rādhāsoāmī yoga(s).
8), Gorakhnāth remains the iconic yoga teacher, and we can use the writings ascribed to him to build structural links to the yoga of the Sants.

From the pioneering work of Barthwal (1936), Hazariprasad Dvivedi (1941), and Charlotte Vaudeville (1974), we know that not only are Kabīr’s poetical works filled with vocabulary and images borrowed from texts ascribed to the Nāths, but also that his practical method for achieving salvation is heavily indebted to Nāth yoga. Dvivedi and Vaudeville have suggested that Kabīr came from a householder Nāth family that had converted to Islam. Furthermore, according to Vaudeville (1993: 95), the weaver-poet was well acquainted with Tantric and yogic jargon and practices. Mariola Offredi (2002) points to general doctrinal similarities in the songs of Kabīr and Gorakhnāth, such as scorn for a traditional, hierarchical society with its religious rites and holy scriptures, and Kabīr’s appreciation for the ascetic (avdhū), whom he often treats as the recipient of his songs. She also notes that, in one of his songs, Kabīr openly recognizes Gorakhnāth as a true avdhū who gained knowledge of Rāma. Moreover, it can be observed that pad 165, from the Kabīr Granthavālī, is a reworking and indeed an answer to one of the songs from Gorakhbāṇī (about tenth to fourteenth century). However, despite its resemblance to the Nāth song, Kabīr’s pad is critical of the yogic method it describes (Offredi 2002: 130–31, 133, 136). Another such case, pertaining to two different pads from the above-mentioned collections, is analyzed by David N. Lorenzen (2011: 37–43). This author confirms strong ties between Kabīr and the Nāths, also through their affiliation with the nirguṇī ethos of worshiping a formless God. However, while the use of Nāth yogic vocabulary in Kabīr poems is undeniable, Lorenzen acknowledges that it is impossible to call Kabīr well versed in Tantric yoga, mostly because his use of the Nāth technical terms is rather loose and does not display a deeper knowledge of the subtle body. We are also not given any proof of Kabīr’s involvement in hatha yoga-related practices (Lorenzen 2011: 31, 34).

Putting the differences aside for a moment, it is important to look at the shared vocabulary in Gorakhbāṇī and Kabīr’s collected verses: Bījak and Kabīr Granthavālī. Among the terms used most, we find words pertaining to hatha yoga, but also some prominent surat-śabd-yoga terms used by Sants: gagan (“sky”), dasvān dvār, unman (“un-mind”), anahad (“unstruck sound”), and sahaja. All these words are used to signify the state of enlightenment. Among other shared terms we also find surati. This word is of crucial importance, as it is the direct antecedent of surat used by the Rādhāśāmīs. It has an uncertain etymology, but it seems that both Gorakhnāth and Kabīr use it as a term connected with sound and hearing of the internal anahad śabd (that is, as derived from śruti, “ear,” “hearing”) (Offredi 1999: 169; Vaudeville 1993: 117). Appearing less frequently are āsan, cakra, and kamāval. Note the scarcity of terms such as nāḍī (no occurrence in the works of Kabīr) and suśaman (occurring only three times in Kabīr Granthavālī) and the total absence of

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12 Su-rati can mean “sexual enjoyment,” or it may come from srota (“current”), but its most popular meanings suggest a derivation from smrti (“memory”) or śruti (“ear,” “that which is heard”) (Offredi 1999: 168–69). It seems that surati, a term that originally indicated a mode of practice (the yoga of listening to the śabd), was substantialized into meaning “soul”—that is, that for which the yoga is performed and that which has the ability to hear.
terms such as kuṇḍalinī and prāṇāyām in the works mentioned (Lorenzen 2011: 31–32).

The absence of some important words connected with the subtle body and vital energies in the works attributed to Gorakhnāth might come as a surprise, but Lorenzen’s account involves only one such work—a collection of poetic verse, and not a systematic treatise. If we look, however, at a more structured scripture such as the Gorakṣaśataka, we find an abundance of all the above words connected with the practice of haṭha yoga and subtle body. When it comes to Kabīr, it would be safe to assume that the weaver-poet—even if his knowledge was not thorough—was familiar with the basics of Nāth yoga and the theory of subtle body. This could also be supported by the claims of Barthwal (1936: 134, 136), who states that Kabīr knew the classical set of six cakras. It is to be kept in mind, however, that Kabīr often used his knowledge to criticize the yogin’s way of life and practices and is not to be considered a yogin himself.

The nirgunī Sant tradition was in constant dialogue with influences from Nāth yoga. References to the system of energy points, to channels in the subtle body, and even to breathing exercises are to be found in the Sant repertoire, as shown by Barthwal (1936: 137–41) and more recently by Daniel Gold (2015). The influence of Nāth thought on Rādhāsoāmī writings might become more visible if we acknowledge the feasible impact of the Kabīrpanthīs from Chattisgarh (known as Dharamdāsīs) upon Tulsī Śāhib, the supposed guru of Shiv Dayāl Singh. It is traceable in Tulsī’s Ghaṭ Rāmāyaṇa, which shares formal and doctrinal traits with Anurāg Sāgar, a primary Dharamdāsī text, ascribed to Kabīr, but most likely composed in the eighteenth/nineteenth century. The Nāth influence, preserved within the Dharamdāsī community, encompassed a practice of breathing control, repetition of mantras, and listening to the internal sound, as well as the idea of an upward journey of the individual soul (Juergensmeyer 1991: 26–31). Tulsī and Dayāl Singh opposed most haṭha yoga practices (although Tulsī is said to have practiced prāṇāyām [Gold 2015: 146]) but appropriated a great deal of Nāth technical vocabulary, the general frame of the cakras, the idea of the upward movement of the vital element through the subtle body, the importance of the “unstruck sound,” and the technique of silent repetition of formulas (ajapā jāp). Even though Tulsī and Soāmījī declared that their vision of yoga was distinct from that of their forerunners, we see that they retained some elements of yoga theory coming directly from the Nāths as well as from the earlier generation of nirgunī Sants. (The latter includes the practice of concentrating one’s gaze at the point between the eyebrows [bhrīmadyṣṭi].)

In terms of changes and modifications, it is justified to say that the later Sants tried to minimize the physical side of their yoga and underlined its mental aspects. Following the example of Kabīr, they denounced haṭha yoga’s practices as focused too much on outward observances (Barthwal 1936: 145–47, 150–51). This, of course, had no impact on the already established deep structural ties between haṭha yoga and surat-śabd-yoga, which we will now address.
Visions of the Subtle Body

The *hatha yoga* of the Nāthas is based on the notion of the subtle body as a system of structures consisting of energy centers (*cakra*), channels (*nāḍī*), “winds” (*vāyu*) (for example, breath, *prāṇa*), “sheats” (*vyoma*), “supports” (*ādāra*), points of concentration (*laksya*), and subtle energies such as *kuṇḍalinī*. In this complex “mystical physiology,” the structures mentioned correspond somewhat to the purely physiological functions of the human body, but should be seen above all as expressing transphysiological experiences possible to attain only through mental discipline. According to *Gorakṣapaddhati* (13–14)\(^{13}\) and *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati* (2.61), only the *yogins* who gain knowledge of this system can attain perfection.

The classical account on the system of *cakras* is found in *Śrītattvācintāmāṇi*, a sixteenth-century work on *kuṇḍalinī yoga* by Pūrṇānanda. This scripture devotes its sixth chapter (“Ṣatcakranirūpana”) to the theory of the six primary *cakras*, plus the seventh, being the final stage. For the purpose of our inquiry, only the names and locations of the *cakras* are needed: (1) *mūlādhāra*, located at the base of the spine, between the anus and reproductive organs; the resting place of the *kuṇḍalinī*; (2) *svādhiṣṭāna*, in the reproductive organs; (3) *manipūrānābhi*, in the region of the navel; (4) *ānāhata/hrday*, in the region of the heart; (5) *viṣuddhakaṇṭha*, in the throat; (6) *ājñā*, in the space between the eyebrows; and (7) *sahasrāra*, at the top of the head.

The *Gorakṣapaddhati* (13) sustains this classic scheme of seven *cakras*, but the *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati* expands it (Mallik 1954: 37–39). In the space above *viṣuddha*, it inserts the *tālu cakra*, located at the root of the palate (*ṭūmunula*). This is a place where “nectar” (*amṛta*) continuously flows down from its “reservoir” in the *sahasrāra*, through a channel known as the *śaṅkhīnī* or *baṅka nāla* (“curved duct”). In the *Gorakṣavijaya*, it is described as a double-mouthed serpent with one mouth above and the other below. According to *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati* (2.6), in this palate there is a small aperture called the “mouth of the *śaṅkhīnī*” (*śaṅkhīnī vivara*) or the “tenth door” (*dasvān dvār*) (Dasgupta 1946: 275–76).\(^{14}\) The nine doors of the human body register outward experiences, but the “tenth door” marks an access point to the inner world beyond empirical consciousness. In the *tālu cakra*, a *yogin* should meditate on emptiness (*śūnya*), thus halting consciousness through *cittalaya*, or dissolution (Banerjea 1962: 178–79). Moreover, the “nectar” dripping down from *sahasrāra* (also called “the moon”) must be conserved and absorbed by closing the “tenth door” with the *khecarī mudrā*. Expanding the *cakra* scheme even further, *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati* differentiates the *sahasrāra*—also known as *brah-*

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13 I refer here to the numbering of *ślokas* in Briggs (1938). His translation, of what he considered to be *Gorakṣasatāka*, is in fact the first hundred verses of *Gorakṣapaddhati* (Kuvalayananda and Shukla 1954). *Gorakṣasatāka* was first translated by Mallinson (2012b).

14 According to *Gorakhbāṇi* (for example, *pads* 23, 19, *sabādī* 135), the term “tenth door” is used to mean *sahasrāra/brahmarandhra*, so it appears to have a double function in Nāth thought.
marandhra—into nirvāṇa cakra (2.8) and ākāśa cakra (2.9), where the practitioner attains a final transformation of consciousness through raising kunḍalinī śakti to the seat of Śiva (Banerjea 1962: 179–80).

We shall now move to the theory of subtle body in Rādhāsoāmī thought, by considering the schemata created by Soāmīji and the masters of Agra and Beas communities. All Rādhāsoāmī schemes of subtle body, or rather the “maps” of inner “regions” or “planes” (sthān), are based on the descriptions in the Bacans and vague enough to justify diverse interpretations. We have already demonstrated that this scheme is inspired by the Tantric vision of the subtle body and its elaboration found in the Nāth hātha yoga manuals. But the great complexity of the “inner cosmos” of the Bacans is also indebted to the writings of the later Sants, especially the Kabīrpanthīs (Barthwal 1936: 27–29), who, in all probability, inspired Tulṣī Sāhib and his intricate classifications (Gold 1987: 127–31).

Shiv Dayāl Singh’s vision of the stages of the soul’s journey encompasses twelve primary “regions” organized into three larger “spheres.” The “material sphere” (piṇḍ) contains six bodily cakras ending with dodal kaṃval (a “two-petaled lotus”) or tīsra tīl (the “third eye”), being the seat of surat (Sār Bacan Prose 1.19) and located behind the eyes (āṅkhom ke pīche). Next, Sār Bacan Prose (1.15) mentions the three “spheres” of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, where the original form (asl rūp) of those gods is to be seen. This “sphere” is classified as belonging to brahmāṇḍ, or to the separate “astral sphere” (and). The “casual sphere” (brahmāṇḍ) begins with the sahasdal kaṃval/sahasrāra (“thousand-petaled lotus”) situated above the eyes (1.26). Since the displacement of the sahasrāra cakra is crucial to the present discussion, we must stress that the locations of tīsra tīl and sahasrāra in the body are, respectively, behind and above the eyes, suggesting the space traditionally ascribed to ājñā cakra. But while the “two-petaled lotus” marks the end of the “physical sphere,” the “thousand-petaled lotus” belongs to a different dimension (brahmāṇḍ) altogether (Puri 2007: 189). The surat-śabd-yoga gives an opportunity to start the practice from this precise point, thus shortening the whole process by omitting the six lower cakras. Brahmāṇḍ also comprises trikuṭī (gagan), dasvān dvār (sun), and bhanvar guphā. The “spiritual sphere” (sac khaṇḍ) encompasses satlok/satnām and rādhāsvāmī dhām, the seat of the Highest Being, also known as the anāmī (“nameless”) and akah (“indescribable”).

15 For a comprehensive description of the soul’s journey through the “inner regions,” see Sār Bacan Poetry 20. Compare Juergensmeyer (1991: 97–107); Babb (1986: 35–48).
16 Unlike other Rādhāsoāmī authors, Kaushal (1998: 96) refers to it as agya or ajana (that is, ājñā).
17 Note the difference between “residences” of gods in piṇḍ and their “original form” in and.
18 Sār Bacan Prose account omits bhanvar guphā, but it is mentioned, for example, in Sār Bacan Poetry 19.18.14.
The Agra scheme was developed by Rai Saligrama, while the Beas one was created by Sawan Singh (1858–1948) (Juergensmeyer 1991: 105). The Agra model encompasses as many as eighteen separate stages, six for each of the three “spheres.” Pind—understood as a microcosm mirroring the structure and functions of the macrocosm—denotes not only the human body *sensu stricto*, but also all of the visible universe. It comprises of the six “lower” cakras, or “regions,” of the cosmos. It is the domain of matter, time (kāl), and transmigration (caurāsī). The next “sphere,” brahmāṇḍ, where the spiritual is mixed with matter, is the “causal” plane from which the visible universe is created. Transmigration does not exist here, nor do the four yugas—only a periodic destruction (pralaya). It consists of three “regions” administered by the gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu (sometimes referred to as ṣaṇḍ) and Śiva, the sahasdal kaṃval,19 trikuṭī, and dasvān dvār (sunn). When the soul goes through the “tenth door,” it throws off the remaining material residues and moves beyond the known three-fold universe (triloka), to exist only as a pure spirit not affected by time, karman, or transmigration. This state is equal to mokṣa in the traditional Hindu view, but the Rādhāsoāmīs understand it as a transitional phase on the way to a higher destination. This destination, the uppermost of the three “spheres,” is named dayāl deś (“region of the merciful”) and its gateway is the “rotating cave” (bhanvar guphā). Dayāl deś is purely spiritual, changeless, and

19 In the Beas scheme, the sahasdal kaṃval belongs to ṣaṇḍ whereas trikuṭī belongs to brahmāṇḍ. Compare Puri (2007: 185); Juergensmeyer (1991: 106); Singh (2002: 361).
timeless—a final destination and the “home” of the soul. Its five “regions” constitute, in fact, five aspects of the Highest Being: satlok (“realm of being”), anāmī lok (“realm of the nameless”), alakh lok (“realm of the invisible”), agam lok (“realm of the inaccessible”), and rādhāsvāmī dhām (“realm of Rādhāsoāmī”) (Babb 1986: 38–40; Juergensmeyer 1991: 101–4).

The scheme followed in the Beas tradition is simplified and encompasses only five or eleven regions, if we count the bodily cakra s separately. The “material sphere” encompasses six cakra s, brahmāṇḍ has sahasdal kaṃval, trikuṭī, dasvān dvār, and bhanvar guphā, while the “spiritual sphere” is represented by satlok. The most substantial change here is the conflation of the four highest regions into one. The Beas tradition, holding that their own tradition is a continuation of the teachings of past Sants, sees in rādhāsvāmī dhām only a new name given by Shiv Dayāl Singh for the abode of the Nameless (anāmī), synonymous with other “regions” in the “spiritual sphere” that were known to Sants of past generations. The Agra tradition maintains that salvation is possible only for those who ascend to the highest region that was discovered solely by Soāmījī. For them, this fact validates the unique position of the Rādhāsoāmī tradition as an entirely new religious movement (Babb 1986: 47–48).

The Subtle and the Physical Body

An important facet of the Rādhāsoāmī theory of the body is its strong emphasis on the fact that it is structured in a manner analogous to the (macro)cosmos. This theory has a long history in Indian thought and can be traced back to the Rāg Vedic hymns such as the Puruṣasūkta (10.90).

The idea of a whole universe being contained within the human body is a popular view of Hindu and Buddhist Tantra, and as such can be found in the works attributed to Gorakhnāth. From the Nāth tradition, it permeated into the writings of Kabīr and later Sants. A primary Nāth yoga manual, the Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati, besides presenting the reader with a comprehensive theory of the subtle yogic body (2.1–34), identifies organs of the human body with various macrocosmic objects (whole worlds, regions, heavenly bodies, and so on) as well as with living creatures and even human emotions (3.1–14). In Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati, the term used for body is piṇḍa (“ball,” “lump”). It is known as a sacrificial rice ball in Rāg Veda, but Pramārthaśāra, a sixth-century Vedānta commentary, gives it the meaning of a manifested body being the lowest emanation of Brahma, while in the eighth-ninth century Mālinīvijayotaratatantra, it explicitly denotes the human body. In Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati (1.4–21), piṇḍa is used to denote a series of bodies, the highest of which is the five-fold supreme (para) being and the beginningless (anādī) piṇḍa of Śiva. Here Śiva is a Rāg Vedic mahāpuruṣa, a universal sacrificial man, but also a yogin, whose body is the image of the cosmos (White 2011: 84–86, 88–90).

20 Kabīr frequently refers to the human body as a “clay pot” (ghat) where all spiritual practices are to be performed (Bījak, šābds 41, 75). Salvation is to be reached while the body is still alive (Vaudeville 1993: 170–71).
A similar anthropocentric cosmology is at play in the Rādhāsoāmī tradition. The term pīṇḍ denotes a human body homologous with the visible material universe. In the scheme of the subtle body, however, this sphere encompasses only the six lowest cakras, from gudā to tīśra tīl. The subtle body reaches beyond pīṇḍ, and the center of sahasdal kamval is already an entry point to the higher, “spiritual-material sphere” of brahmāṇḍ. This means that the purely “material (bodily) sphere,” homologous with the entire cosmos, ends with the lowest part of the subtle body and that the remaining parts of the subtle body encompass two more “worlds” beyond our perceivable universe. They are located “above the eyes, in the brain” (Kaushal 1998: 97). These higher “worlds” are structured similarly to pīṇḍ, which in turn is their reflection (chāyā) (Sār Bacaṇ Prose 1.18). Even so—as Sār Bacaṇ Prose (1.25) clearly states—the whole scheme of the three-fold (or four-fold, if we count and separately) “universe,” with its respective higher (ulavī) and lower (sifalī) cakras (“regions”), is contained “within” (antar). I assume that antar here refers to the subtle body in toto—with brahmāṇḍ, (and), and sac khand as the higher and pīṇḍ as the lower “spheres”—and not to the coarse physical body indicated by the term pīṇḍ. For while the second body is a prison for the soul which must be transcended, the first body works as the only means through which this transcendence can be achieved.

So, unlike in the Nāth scheme, the subtle body and the physical body (that is, pīṇḍ) do not overlap, but rather the subtle reaches beyond the physical. This fact is, of course, connected with the displacement of the sahasrāra cakra to the place “above the eyes” in order to superimpose the two highest “spheres” on the space between ājñā and sahasrāra cakra. The rationale for this lies naturally in the need to present surat-śabd-yoga as a practice exceeding other forms of yoga. The “peak” of the “Tantric” subtle body, which can be realized through hatha yoga, is achieved by reaching the sahasdal kamval. However, for the Rādhāsoāmīs, this does not exhaust the potential of the subtle body, which still incorporates higher levels that can be reached only through surat-śabd-yoga.

This body—containing not only the cosmos perceivable to human senses, but also the higher regions open to spiritual insight—is still structured according to the hatha yogic scheme. This means that all of its stages are, on an ontological level, accessible in the subtle body, but on the epistemological level—that is, as experiences—they may evoke states that can be interpreted as transcending that particular bodily context. By including the complete subtle body of older traditions within the confines of their own bodily scheme, the Rādhāsoāmīs subdue those traditions and present them as incomplete paths that can give access only to limited knowledge available by reaching the lower levels of the subtle body.

21 The homologies within the Rādhāsoāmī subtle body scheme are especially apparent in the symmetrical Soamibagh scheme. The highest cakras of each of the three “spheres” (rādhāsvāmī dhām, dasvān dvār, tīśra tīl) are understood as functionally equivalent, because they are responsible for progressing and storing the spiritual principle (surat) (Babb 1986: 42).
Correspondences Between the Subtle Body Schemes

To complete our account of the structural similarities between the Nāth and Sant subtle body schemes, we shall now give a brief description of the most vital correspondences between important components of the subtle body.

First of all, there is a full equivalence between the six bodily cakras, although the Rādhāsoāmīs use alternative terms. It seems, however, that the equivalent of the sahasrāra lies in the highest spiritual “sphere,” which was overlaid onto the space between ājñā and sahasrāra. The baṅknāl—a channel that connects sahasdal kamval with trikuṭī (Sār Bacin Poetry 19.18.14, 5.4.9)—is modeled on the baṅka nāla of Gorakhbāṇī (pad 53) and Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati (2.6)—that is, the śaṅkhini connecting sahasrāra with the amṛta “reservoir” in tālu cakra. The term trikuṭī appears in Gorakhbāṇī (pads 11, 13, and so on) and refers to the confluence of the three “rivers” of iṛā, pīṇgalā, and susuṃṇā (Gaṅgā, Yamunā, and Sarasvatī) at the trikuṭī saṅgam—that is, ājñā cakra (Prayāg) (Gorakhbāṇī, sabadi 28; Djurdjevic 2008: 118). David Gordon White (1996: 301–2, 506), also referring to Gorakhbāṇī, places the saṅgam in the sahasrāra. For Gorakhnāth, trikuṭī is the place where wisdom and mastery over the body is attained (Gorakhbāṇī, pad 39). For Kabīr, it is the first spiritual “region” located in the ājñā cakra (Barthwal 1936: 136, 156). In Rādhāsoāmī schemes, trikuṭī is placed above ājñā, but, due to the inclusivist agenda, it loses its soteriological importance, although retaining a cosmological role (Sār Bacin Prose 1.14): hence its name—gagan (“sky”) (note the reinterpretation of this term below). Nevertheless, according to Sār Bacin Poetry (20.5.21), the three primary nāḍīs meet in tribenī, which is not in trikuṭī, but in sunn, also known as dasyān dvār (the “tenth door”). This cakra has a deep functional affinity with the tālu mentioned in Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati (see 3.2). It is named the “tenth door” because there the surat frees itself from mind and matter (Sār Bacin Prose 1.13). The name sunn comes from śānya, a term inherited from the Nāths, who appropriated it from the Buddhist siddhas (Gold 1987: 201, 234). The Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati speaks of a “continuous flow” of nectar (amṛta-dhārā-pravāhā) in the “tenth door,” while Faqīr Chand (Nd: 80–81) sees it as a place of the “dripping” of amṛta. Moreover, the nectar is stored there in a “lake” called mānsarovar (Sār Bacin Poetry 1.1.30, 19.18.15). The sahasrāra in Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati (3.4) is named satya loka (“realm of truth”—the last of seven “spheres” (one for each cakra), which describe the cakras as levels of increasingly sublime yogic experience (satya loka represents all-knowing perception) (Djurdjevic 2008: 77; White 2011: 81; Burley 2000: 164–65). For the Agra Rādhāsoāmīs, satlok (“realm of truth”) is the second “sphere” of dayāl deś. According to the Beas view, satlok can be a synonym for sac khaṇḍ, or the term used for the highest cakra (“region”) (sometimes subdivided into sac khaṇḍ, alakh, agam, anāmī, and rādhāsvāmī dhām) (Puri 2007: 173–77; Kaushal 1998: 100–101; Juergensmeyer 1991: 106–7). In this regard, we can state that the highest, spiritual realm of Rādhāsoāmīs bears the function of sahasrāra. When the Rādhāsoāmīs decided to use the term sahasdal kamval, they applied it to a very different cakra, dissimilar in function to the topmost energy point recognized by Gorakhnāth and Kabīr, as gagan (Vaudeville 1993: 255; Offredi 2002: 137–38). The “thousand-
petaled lotus,” despite its name, is located in the space occupied by ṛṣaṅa cakra in the Nāṭh paradigm. Deprived of its soteriological importance, the sahasrāra is given a three-fold role: it serves as a main tool in inclusivist hermeneutics (ultimately responsible for its new function), becomes the initial cakra for the practice of surat-śabd-yoga (Sār Bacaṇ Prose 1.33), and gives access to the first nonphysical “sphere” of and or brahmānd.

Surat-śabd-yoga fully utilizes three main channels of the subtle body. Contrary to what is stated in Sār Bacaṇ Prose (20.5.21), Puri (2007: 253) argues that the three channels, flowing from īśra til to trikuṭī, converge therein, and from trikuṭī, only the sukhmanā (suṣumnā) goes upwards, reaching suṇn (and beyond). The nāḍīs have two functions. Firstly, they enable the upward advancement of surat—it is said to enter sukhmanā after gaining control over the brahmāṇḍīmaṇ (this happens after reaching trikuṭī) (Sār Bacaṇ Prose 38.8.14). Secondly, they carry the positive and negative internal sound: “on the right [in pīṅgalā] is the stream of śabd, on the left [in īrā], the trap of kāl” (9.4.17). In the place called sundar (“beautiful”), the inner melody (dhun) is perceived in the sukhmanā (5.4.8). We cannot be sure of the location of sundar,22 but it is clear that, from this point onwards, surat advances through the central nāḍī, hence the sukhmanā must be an entry path to rādhāśvāmī dhām. Therefore, it occupies a position analogous to the suṣumnā23 described in Ṣaṭhaptadipikā, which states: “When the sleeping kuṇḍalinī awakens through the guru’s grace, all cakras and knots (grantha) are penetrated, prāṇa flows through the royal road of suṣumnā, the mind becomes released (nirālamba) [from sensory objects], and death is cheated” (3.2–3). Also, collecting the breath in suṣumnā and restraining it, is said to calm the mind (manonmani) and preserve bindu (4.20–28).

Thus, the central nāḍī serves as a gateway to liberation, and furthermore as a path for the upward movement of kuṇḍalinī (Gorakṣapaddhati 50). In both Nāṭh and Rādhāśoāmī sources, suṣumnālsukhmanā enables the upward movement of the respective vital principles (prāṇalīja, kuṇḍalinī, surat) and leads to the highest destination in the subtle body.24 In such a context, it is perhaps natural to posit that surat and kuṇḍalinī—the vital principles of soteriological importance, that are transported through the central nāḍī—should be read, on the functional level, as analogous.

In the works attributed to Gorakhnāth, anahad śabdānād is understood mainly as the internal sound audible exclusively during yoga practice. In Gyāntilak and Gorakhbodh, anahad śabdānād expresses an esoteric aspect of the śabd, available only to initiates. It dwells within the body, and hearing it means being close to, or

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22 Puri (2007: 256) reads sundar as suṇn, the Beas selection from Sār Bacaṇ Prose (Singh 2002: 26–27) as sahasdal kamyāl, and the Soamibag Bācaṇ Prose translation (Singh 1970: 109) as “celestial region.” It would seem that the “thousand-petaled lotus” is a logical choice, as the next verses (Sār Bacaṇ Prose 5.4.9–10) mention the soul ascending to bāṅkāl and trikuṭī. This is confirmed by Sār Bacaṇ Prose 20.6.5, where the sukhmanā is said to open after surat enters bāṅkāl—that is, after passing through sahasadal kamyāl.

23 Notice, however, the staunch opposition to equating sukhmanā with the “sushumna of [the] yogis” that carries breath energy and is associated with the physical energy centers (Puri 2007: 309; Singh 2002: 10, 363).

24 The transfer of knowledge of nāḍīs, between Nāṭhs and Rādhāśoāmīs, is, again, mediated by Kabīr, who was well aware of their function in Nāṭh thought (Vaudeville 1993: 258).
actually attaining, liberation; as such, it is synonymous with supreme reality (Offredi 1999: 155–56). The *anahad nād* is associated primarily with the state of *saḥaja* in the *saḥasrāra*: “the unstruck sound thunders in the sky (*gagan*)” (Gorakhbāṇī, pad 22, sabādi 177). There, conjoined with *bindu*, it marks the consummation of yogic practice (Gorakhbāṇī, sabādi 135; Djurdjevic 2008: 94). The internal sound is manifested when the *nādīs* become purified and *prāṇa* is restrained (Gorakṣapaddhati 101). The same information appears in Ḥaṭhapradīpikā 2.20, but we find the main discourse on *anāhata nāda* in the fourth chapter of this work. Concentrating on the internal sound is most effective in inducing the state of *laya* (“absorption,” “dissolution”), which consists of eliminating all sensory input and listening to internal sounds occurring in the heart, throat, and eye *cakras* (Haṭhapradīpikā 4.66–76). By uniting *nāda* and mind (*citta*) in the ājñā cakra (that is, by attaining *rāja yoga*), happiness (*sukha*), and subsequently calmness of mind, is attained (4.77–78, 4.92). In the poems of Kabīr, *anahad śabd/nād* is similarly perceptible within the body and heard at the decisive stages of practice (Gold 2015: 134). It often marks the realization of the supreme state, expressed, for example, as the merging of the soul with the name of Rāma. Furthermore, Kabīr associates the goal of practice with the union of *nād* and *bindu* (Vaudeville 1993: 281–84). But while Gorakhnāth’s way is to actively seek *śabd* using clearly defined corporeal techniques, Kabīr waits to receive *śabd* from the guru (Djurdjevic 2008: 91–93; Gold 2015: 135–36), and then cultivates it through an exclusively mental discipline, described in rather vague terms. The Rādhāsoāmī *anahad nād* theory is an heir to both of the above approaches. According to Sār Bacan Prose, “only inner hearing and consenting are of benefit” (2.161). In the Bacans, just as in Gorakhbāṇī, *anahad nād* is heard in *gagan* (Sār Bacan Poetry 35.15.2), although here this means a lower region of *trikuṭī*. Still, listening to the “unstruck” sound initiates the *bhajan* stage of *surat-śabd-yoga*, in which the *surat* begins its ascent into higher “regions” (“seize the mind, pull it [inward], then hear the *anahad nād*” [20.4.4]; “I catch *śabd* and elevate the *surat*…” [34.5.11]). The *anahad śabd* is an empirical aspect of *śabd*—the creational energy of the Lord (9.2.1–5). It is synonymous with the *nām* of God (9.3.5), that constantly resonates within beings (9.1.9, 9.2.6) and appears in the highest “regions” as diverse melodies (20.7). The realization of *yoga* is the merging of *surat* with its source—Rādhāsoāmī *śabd* (34.5.18). The Rādhāsoāmī method is differentiated mostly by the emphasis placed on initiation, enabling the hearing of internal sounds (Sār Bacan Prose 2.71). *Surat śabd yoga* uses techniques defined as clearly as the Nāth *yoga* methods, but completely devoid of any corporeal traits. Similar to Kabīr’s approach, the overall mode of this practice is passive, with *śabd* being bestowed by the guru, rather than actively strived for by the devotee.

**The Rādhāsoāmī Subtle Body Theory and Inclusivist Historiosophy**

The aim of the above analysis was to reveal the affinity between Rādhāsoāmī *surat-śabd-yoga* and its closest antecedent—the Nāth *haṭha yoga*. We have seen that this affinity is visible from the outset in the apparent links between the thought of Gorakhnāth and Kabīr. The pivotal role of bestowing knowledge on Nāth *yoga*—
albeit already in a very modified form—on to the Radhasoami, should be assigned to the Kabirpanthis of the Dharamdasí branch. As observed by Barthwal (1936: 27–32), it was the Kabirpanthis who, by simplifying and reifying Kabir’s notions of stages of higher practice, began the process of constructing a hierarchical theology, thus widening the gap between the two forms of yoga, but also preparing the ground for the Radhasoami innovations.

The sources of Radhasoami yoga are manifold and should be viewed as the result of a long process of historical development within the Sant tradition itself. Surat-śabd-yoga, containing a heavy bhakti component, was certainly influenced by the Vaisnavas and Šūfis (Callewaert 2011: 532), but it seems that its decisive character was formed, if not by Nāth yoga per se, then by some other method orientated towards bodily cakras in the point between the eyes and higher. The practice of listening to internal sounds was also a major influence (Gold 2015: 132). The original Sant practice was inextricably connected with the six cakras, and although theirs was not a sensu stricto bodily yoga, they felt comfortable with using yogic jargon to describe their own experiences. This resulted from the fact that the basic pattern for Sant yoga, the theory of subtle body, remained rooted in Nāth thought.

It was only later, in the period between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, that the “esoteric” Sants dismissed the validity of practice based on the six cakras. However, not all strands of the Sant tradition followed suit. This is apparent in the teachings of Malik Dās, a seventeenth century Sant who developed his own version of aṣṭāṅga yoga with a strong devotional component, and in the approach of his successor, Nanāk Chand (b. 1926), who conflates bhakti, prāṇāyām, and the recitation of mantras at different cakras. Another modern exemplification of a similar Sant practice was the method of Mālik Sāhib (1909–1983). Initiated in Sant and Śaivaite lineages, Malik strived to combine listening to the “unstruck” śabd with raising the kundalini through prāṇāyām, bodily postures, and devotion to the guru (Gold 2015: 139–46). It may be added that the Dharamdāsīs, the spiritual progenitors of the Radhasoamīs, practiced listening to anahad nād as well as prāṇāyām (Juergensmeyer 1991: 29).

The close correspondences between surat-śabd-yoga and haṭha yoga, clearly visible in the teachings of the more atypical Sants, are nevertheless also apparent in the Radhaśoamī method, even though their yoga has an almost exclusively mental character. The scheme of subtle body, although heavily modified, is still the framework for this yogic practice and remains the main link between these two yogic methods. For that precise reason, the early modern era Sants chose to alter this very framework in order to distinguish their practice from its origins and appropriate the immediate antecedents of their yoga as incomplete expressions of the ultimate truth. This operation had both an innovative and conservative aspect. It modified surat-śabd-yoga by expanding the system of cakras located above ājnā, but at the same time confirmed its characteristic as a practice whose basic mechanics reproduce haṭha yoga’s idea of advancing a vital principle to the cakra at the top of the head. Reaching the highest energy centers is often termed an “out of the body” experience, but this does not mean the invention of new ontic realities beyond the body, rather it denotes a series of experiences, in which the human spirit transcends its own capacity for comprehending spiritual truths.
The modification of the structure of subtle body brings us to our main hypothesis and the notion of Inklusivismus. In order to secure the position of their religious school as the ultimate path, the Ṛādhasoāṃīs chose to present their tradition not only as a true alternative to the mainstream Brāhmanic traditions, but also as the fulfillment of its premises, thus subscribing to the heterodox anti-Brāhmanic Sant heritage and also to the classic idea of inclusivism. However, the inclusivist stance of the Ṛādhasoāṃīs is more far reaching. It is particularly apparent in the strategy of presenting santmat not as a “religion” (Puri 2007: 17), but as an updated version of the one universal path that reaches the one universal truth and is chosen by all historical “saints.” The path of the “saints” is purely spiritual, eternal, and mystical, thus transcending the “social and moral institutions” that today’s religions are reduced to (Puri 2007: 17). This perennial standpoint does not, however, encourage the Ṛādhasoāṃīs to preach pluralism, as it does not entail plurality of methods, but endorses a historiosophy in which Ṛādhasoāṃī teaching is presented as the way to reveal the true nature of other traditions’ misinterpretations of mystical truth. This inclusivist approach resulted from two main reasons. Firstly, it was a natural continuation of the tendency of immediate “ultraist” Ṛādhasoāṃī forerunners, who, motivated by an “obsession of superiority…, relegate[d] the realization of the earlier…[Nirguna-panthīs], as also of those belonging to other religions, to a lower position” (Barthwal 1936: 30). Secondly, it must have been motivated by the need for an effective strategy of diffusing the teachings.

The areas in which the inclusivist position was mostly advanced encompass the notion of “qualified perennialism” and the hierarchical scheme of micro- and macrocosm. The single most potent expression of Ṛādhasoāṃī inclusivism, which enabled inclusivist (re)interpretations of history, lies therefore in the alteration and expansion of the scheme of subtle body. All depictions of subtle body produced by the Ṛādhasoāṃīs share the same crucial trait of displacing the sahasrā cakra. The account of Shiv Dayāl Singh and the Beas scheme reveal that, on a structural level, sahasrāra/sahasdal kamval replaces ājñā cakra, while its traditional function is imparted to the rādhasvāṃī dhām/satlok. This general scheme remains unchanged in the Soamibagh version. However, rādhasvāṃī dhām is treated there as a homologue of the “third eye” and the “tenth door.” The insistence on symmetry and internal functional analogies obscures the role of rādhasvāṃī dhām and imposes an interpretation in which yogic practice, from an ontological viewpoint, ends with reaching the cakra between the eyes. Thus, the Soamibagh scheme, presenting one subtle body as three bodies of increasing subtlety, most strikingly exemplifies the desire of the Ṛādhasoāṃīs to break away from the confines of the traditional subtle body scheme. Nevertheless, this very quality of the discussed scheme renders it less useful as a case in point for the theory put forward in this article.

The alteration of the subtle body scheme has had two major repercussions. Prompted by the need for pedagogic efficacy, it facilitated the simplification of practice that helped create an image of the Ṛādhasoāṃī method as the best suited and most efficient yoga for the kali yuga. Moreover, it entailed detachment of surat-śabd-yoga from any kind of bodily practice. A tendency to discard practices related to the body and sexuality was already apparent in the preceding Naṭh and Sant traditions. We know that Gorakhnāth reformed the Tantric Kaula practices of his
master Matsyendranāth by rejecting married life, taking up celibacy, and internalizing Kaula sexual practices into the discipline of ṇāṭha yoga (Mallinson 2011a: 413; Offredi 1999: 165; Lorenzen 2011: 47–48). The external aspects of Gorakhnāth’s method were rejected by Kabīr, but later some elements of ṇāṭha yoga, including prāṇāyāma, found their way into the Sant repertoire. Nevertheless, Soāmījī denounced even breathing control in favor of mental śabd practice and devotion to the guru (Gold 2015: 146). This strategy, coupled with the alteration of the cakra system, further loosened surat-śabd-yoga’s ties with ṇāṭha yoga and—albeit on a declarative level—transcended Raṭhāsōmī’s main historical and structural determinant. We can thus observe that structural changes made to the subtle body theory—responsible for simplifying surat-śabd-yoga and detaching it from the historical context—fueled the “ultraist” Raṭhāsōmī tendency to subjugate alien religious traditions. The inclusivist stance, borne out of this tendency, unlocked the possibility of instilling an efficacious pedagogical strategy that used yogic practice as its main tool.

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