

Introduction

David N. Lorenzen and Adrián Muñoz



All disciples sleep, but the Nath Satguru stays full awake.
The Avadhuta begs for alms at the ten gates.

—Gorakh Bānī *pad* 53

The Hindu religious path or sect of the Nath is variously known as the Nath Panth or the Nath Sampraday. Its followers are called Nath yogis, Nath Panthis, Kanphata yogis, Gorakhnathis, and Siddha yogis, among other names. Sometimes the term *avadhūta* is used, although this term is applied to ascetics of other Hindu groups as well. Most Nath yogis claim adherence to the teachings of the early yogi, Gorakṣanātha (in Hindi Gorakhnath). The school of yoga most closely associated with the Nath is the well-known one of haṭha yoga. In more general terms, the combined religious and yogic teachings of the Nath are called the *Nāth-mārga* (the Path of the Nath), the *Yoga-mārga* (the Path of yoga), or the *Siddha-mata* (the doctrine of the Siddhas).

The term *siddha* means “someone perfected or who has attained [spiritual] perfection.” A Siddha (from the Sanskrit root *SIDH*, “to succeed, to perfect”) is an ascetic who has gained different perfections or “successes” (*siddhis*), the most famous being the eight magical *siddhis* achieved through intense yogic practice. The word *nāth* or *nātha* literally means “lord, master; protector, shelter,” and in the present context designates, on the one hand, a follower of the sect founded by or associated with Gorakhnath and, on the other hand, someone who has controlled the

senses through the psycho-physical practices of haṭha yoga. The word is also often used as a name for the god Shiva. In Nath texts, Shiva is often called “Ādi-nātha,” the first or primeval Lord.

Linguistically, the word *nātha* is associated with the Sanskrit root *NĀTH*, meaning “to have dominion or power” but also “to implore or beseech.” *Nātha* is also explained in traditional sources according to a homiletic etymology. Thus the *Rāja-guhyā* states that the syllable *nā* connotes the *anādi* (literally “without origin”)—i.e., the primordial form, whereas the syllable *tha* connotes *sthāpita*, the “established.” *Nātha* then would mean the primeval form or *dharma* established in the three worlds (*bhuvana-trayam*) according to this religious speculation (Dvivedi 1980, 3).

Most Natha are clearly Shaiva in orientation, but some Natha have assumed a more Vaishnava identity. In many Natha texts, their principal God tends to be *nir-guṇa*, a God without form who is essentially indescribable, a semi-monistic God. In fact, a complex web of multiple religious identities has been a constituting feature of the Natha Panth. Natha have constructed their own identity with concepts taken from Hindus (both orthodox and heterodox), Buddhists, Muslims, and Sikhs alike. Usually the Natha have assumed the role of a reformist movement, while in recent times some Natha have fostered a Hindu communalist ideology, especially in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

The history of the Natha Sampraday is not easy to reconstruct, in part because we cannot be sure that the exemplary Natha really lived (Matsyendra, Gorakh, Jalandhar, Chaurangi, etc.). Wassiljew tried to fix the year 800 CE as the emerging point (in Chakravarti 1963, 23). However, if the Natha legendary personalities existed at all, it is rather unlikely that they lived at so early a date. It is more plausible to assume that the first Natha lived sometime between the tenth and the eleventh century, in the northern part of the continent, somewhere between Punjab and Bengal (Bhattacharya 1996, 315; Kienhle 1997; Lorenzen 1987). Although some scholars have suggested, probably rightly, that a period of decline began in the eighteenth century (Bouy 1994, 111; Dvivedi 2004, 273–74), the Natha continue to occupy important sites in both North India and Nepal: Gorakhpur, Hardwar, and Mrigasthali in Kathmandu are just a few examples.

The historical influence of the Natha often extended beyond the religious sphere. In several periods and regions they enjoyed royal patronage and were able to influence political events. In the Punjab, traditional royal support for the Natha yogis is well documented.¹ In Rajasthan, the most famous example is that of Man Singh, the raja of Marwar (Jodhpur). During his whole career, he was influenced by the ascetic Deonath, a follower of Gorakhnath and Jalandharnath. Several historical alliances of this sort existed between Natha ascetics and Rajput rulers.²

Tales and stories about legendary Nath yogis such as Gorakhnath, Matsyendra, Jalandhar, Gopicand, Bharthari, Kanhapa, and Chaurangi are still popular throughout most of South Asia. Contemporary Nath yogis who model their conduct on these earlier figures can still be seen in places such as Deccan, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Hardwar, Garhwal, Bihar, Bengal, Maharashtra, as well as at pilgrimage sites in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tibet, and Nepal. Traditionally, the ideal Nath yogi is considered to be a powerful miracle worker, an expert in controlling the senses and achieving a union with the Ultimate Reality, an individual capable of exerting power over rulers and populace alike. Present-day Nath yogis, however, are often regarded simply as storytellers, singers, and religious beggars. There is evidence to indicate that some Naths began to marry and create their own families as long ago as around 1500 or even earlier. Pitambar Datt Barthwal and Hazariprasad Dvivedi have suggested that the famous fifteenth and sixteenth-century religious poet Kabir may have come from such a family.

NATH STUDIES

One of the reasons why the Naths are so interesting is that historically they have been associated with a complex mix of competing ideals, practices, and soteriologies. Their outward features (earrings, turbans, matted hair, etc.) are mere ornaments that symbolize what it means to be a Nath yogi. Many Naths are ascetic renouncers, but others are householders; some stay in temple monasteries but other spend most of their time on the road; most are devotees of Shiva but some worship this god in anthropomorphic form and others as a formless spirit; some may even combine Muslim and Nath identities.

The Nath Panth has been historically linked to several different religious movements in South Asia. Its origins are to be found in the tantric schools of diverse traditions (Shaiva, Shakta, Buddhist). As the Nath Panth became consolidated, it influenced, and was influenced by, several devotional movements, both in the north (especially with the Nirgunis) and in the south (with the Varkaris and Nayanars). They even mixed with non-Hindu traditions such as Islam and Jainism. These complex interactions still need to be much better researched and analyzed.

Possible scholarly approaches to the doctrines and practices of the Naths are many. Nath texts include yoga treatises and manuals, mostly written in Sanskrit, on the one hand, and folktales and devotional poetry, mostly transmitted in Hindi and other vernacular languages. The study of each type of source requires different skills and disciplinary approaches. The only attempt at a comprehensive study of the Nath sect and Nath literature is the now out-of-date classic by George W. Briggs,

first published in 1938. This work includes a classification of Nath subjects, a discussion of Nath doctrines and practices, and accounts of their legends and folklore. Despite the limits and weaknesses of the source materials available to Briggs, his work remains a necessary reference in modern Nath studies.

Some Nath texts, particularly vernacular folktales and devotional poetry belong largely to oral tradition and are not always available in written, much less published, form. In recent years, Ann Gold (1992) and other anthropologists have collected some of this oral literature, but much more work of this sort is still needed. The musical performance of Nath songs is another underdeveloped topic, although Edward Henry (1991) has published interesting studies in this field. An important study of early Nath songs composed in Marathi has been published by Catharina Kiehle (1997). There is new book on Nath literature, chiefly focused on vernacular folktales, by Adrián Muñoz (2010). A pioneering older study that attempts to make a complete study of North Indian vernacular literature about Gorakh and the Naths is Hazariprasad Dvivedi's *Nāth sampradāy* (1950) in Hindi. Other studies in this area written in Hindi include those of Nagendranath Upadhyay (1991, 1997) and Dharmavir Bharati (1968). Particularly important for the study of vernacular Nath literature are the collections of early Nath texts edited by Pitambar Datt Barthwal (Gorakhnath 1960) and Hazariprasad Dvivedi (1978).

The anthropological and historical study of the Nath Panth and the practices of the Nath ascetics is another large area of research. The recent work of Véronique Bouillier is notable in this regard, particularly her new book, *Itinérance et vie monastique, Les ascètes Nāth Yogīs en Inde contemporaine* (2008). Ann Gold (1989, 1991, and 1992) and Daniel Gold (1992, 1995, 1999, and 2005) have also done important work on the culture of Nath householders in Rajasthan (see also Gold and Gold 1984). Among the older studies that should be noted is a book by Shashibhusan Dasgupta (1995) which includes much information about the Naths in medieval Bengal.

Texts on haṭha yoga and yogic anatomy, sources mostly written in Sanskrit, have been much better studied and good editions and translations of the main texts of haṭha yoga such as the *Haṭhayoga-pradīpikā* and the *Gheraṇḍa-saṃhitā* are easily available. Christian Bouy (1994) has published a good study of the so-called *Yoga-Upaniṣads*. An older work that should be mentioned here is the book on yoga by Mircea Eliade (1969). Another important older volume is the collection of various Sanskrit texts attributed to Matsyendra, the guru of Gorakhnath, including the *Kaula-jñāna-nirṇaya*, edited by Prabodh Chandra Bagchi in 1934 (Matsyendra-nātha 1986). The detailed introduction by Bagchi provides interesting data and suggestions regarding the origins of the Naths and the religious identity of Matsyendra-

dra. Also important in this context is the edition of the *Siddha-siddhānta-paddhati* and other Nath works, with an English introduction, by Kalyani Mallik (1954)

The relations between the Naths and alchemical tradition and between the Naths and Tantric religion have been studied in recent years almost single-handedly by David G. White, most notably in his book, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (1996) and in several other books and articles he has written (1996, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2009a, 2009b). The veritable flood of recent studies on tantric religion, particularly on Kashmir Shaivism, by Mark Dyczkowski (1989, 2004), Alexis Sanderson (1988), Teun Goudriaan and Sanjukta Gupta (1981) and others also contains much information relevant to a study of the Naths. Another topic at least indirectly relevant to the Naths is that of the influence of haṭha yoga on the Muslim Sufis who wrote medieval vernacular romances such as Manjhan's *Madhumālatī*. Aditya Behl and Simon Weightman's recent translation of this work (Manjhan 2000) has a valuable discussion about this in the introduction. Many studies of medieval Nirguni sects such as those of Kabir, Dadu and Nanak also contain information about Naths and their relations to Nirguni religion (see Lorenzen 1991, 1996; McLeod 1980a; McLeod 1980b; Solanki 1966).

THE PRESENT VOLUME

The essays in this volume fill important gaps in our knowledge about the Naths. Since the pioneering studies by G. W. Briggs and H. P. Dvivedi and the recent work by Veronique Boullier, relatively little scholarly work has been done on the Naths, their vernacular literature and their institutions as historical subjects. The essays in the first part of this collection by Purushottam Agrawal, David Lorenzen, Daniel Gold and Ishita Banerjee-Dube all discuss important aspects of these topics. Work on Nath folklore and religious ideas is somewhat better covered by recent scholars, most notably by Ann Gold, but good interpretative studies of these topics are still hard to find. The essays in the second part of this collection by David White, Ann Gold, Adrián Muñoz, Lubomír Ondračka and Csaba Kiss all examine aspects of these issues.

Here, the opening chapter by Purushottam Agrawal discusses the differing ways in which various key twentieth-century literary critics looked at the early Naths, most notably Gorakh, and the vernacular poetry attributed to them. These critics include the Mishra brothers, Ramchandra Shukla, Pitambar Datt Barthwal and Hazariprasad Dvivedi. Agrawal argues that behind the writing of a history of early Hindi literature there has usually been differing understandings of Indian and

Hindu identities as well as differing literary tastes. The division between the religious poets of *bhakti* tradition and more literary, formalist poets (the *rīti* school) has been a constant theme of Hindi literary criticism, as has been the differing assessments of the role and value of Nath poetry.

Agrawal discusses how Ramchandra Shukla, in his famous 1928 history of Hindi literature, introduced the key concepts of “the Hindu *jāti*,” in the sense of cultural and linguistic community, and of “*lok-dharma*,” meaning a settled moral and social order. For Shukla, the promotion of this Hindu *jāti* and this *lok-dharma* was considered to be one of the chief virtues and duties of Hindi poetry. Using these concepts as a yardstick, Shukla proposed a very positive appreciation of *sagunī* (theistic) poets like Tulsidas and a much more negative evaluation of the poetry of Nirguni (semi-monistic) critics of the medieval social order like Kabir and Dadu. Shukla tended to place Gorakh somewhere between Kabir and Tulsidas on his scale of poetic values. Shukla appreciated Gorakh’s promotion of social harmony between Hindus and Muslim, but suggested that Gorakh’s interests were too esoteric and lacked “natural feeling of *bhakti* and love.”

Agrawal next analyzes the work of Pitambar Datt Barthwal on the literature of the Nirguni poets like Kabir and Dadu. Barthwal especially praised their role in fostering Hindu-Muslim unity. About Gorakh and the Naths, Barthwal argued that they had had a strong influence on Kabir and also sponsored communal harmony. Barthwal’s ideas about the influence of Gorakh on Kabir were further developed by Hazariprasad Dvivedi, although Dvivedi also recognized that Kabir could not really be regarded as an “instrument of Hindu-Muslim unity” since he in fact sharply criticized both religions. According to Agrawal, Dvivedi developed his own concept of *lok-dharma*, one quite different from that of Shukla. Dvivedi’s *lok-dharma* was a more descriptive concept close to ideas like “popular religion” or “little tradition” and included both the Naths and the Nirgunis. This *lok-dharma* was associated primarily with Hindu religion and was largely independent of Islam.

In his chapter, David Lorenzen discusses the complex ideas about religious identity found in the poetry of Gorakh and compares them with similar but contrasting ideas found in the poetry of Kabir and the Sikh gurus. All these poets proclaim a religious identity that rises above the contrast between Hindu religion and Islam. In one verse, Gorakh claims a religious identity that somehow combines Islam, Hindu religion, and yoga, although in other texts he seems to distance himself from both Islam and Hindu religion. In the poetry of Kabir and that of the Sikh gurus, there tends to be a clearer rejection of traditional practices of both Islam and Hindu religion, although both Kabir and the Sikh gurus use a theological vocabulary and metaphysical concepts that owe more to Hindu ideas than to Muslim ones. Another important difference between Kabir and Gorakh is in the

role that the body plays in their respective religious ideas. For Gorakh and the Naths the human body is something to be controlled and purified. For Kabir, the body is chiefly important as the dwelling place of the formless divine spirit that Kabir usually calls Ram. Kabir's *sāadhanā* (religious practice) is directed at recognizing this Ram, not at controlling the body.

In his chapter, Daniel Gold explores the interesting way in which the Nath tradition has merged into the local culture of Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh. This regional manifestation of the Naths is unique and quite separate from those in other parts of North India and Nepal. Whereas the figure of the king is present here as elsewhere in Nath culture, the Maharashtrian Naths are a curious blend of Vaishnava religious fervor and Sufi elements. This is particularly notorious in their gatherings at one temple where long, intense musical performances are conducted; these performances are played to the tune of intense drum beatings. The general ambience of these devotional gatherings is quite reminiscent of both Sufi musical practices and Vaishnava *kirtan* singing, the eventual cadence of rhythms leading to a quasi-ecstatic climax.

Gold maps the development of Nath cults in Gwalior since roughly the early eighteenth century until the consolidation of the cult of Raja Bakshar and the lineage of Dholi Buwa. As with Man Singh, king of Jodhpur, and Prithivi-Narayan Shah, in Nepal—here too a leading political figure, Maharaja Daulat Rao (r. 1794–1827), requested the aid of a follower of the Nath Panth, Mahipati Nath. The Dholi Buwa lineage began thus with Mahipati Nath and is still highly influential in Gwalior. In this way, a long-lasting association between the Scindia dynasty and a Nath lineage was established. At the same time, an interesting shift from celibate yogis to householder Naths took place.

A similar ambivalence is found in the case of the Nath lineage of Raja Bakshar as well. Some Maharashtrian Hindus claim that Raja Bakshar is but a Muslim name given to Baba Chaitanya Nath, who is traceable to a Nath yogi lineage. His tomb is thus worshipped both as a yogi *samādhi* (tomb), and a Sufi shrine. Daniel Gold argues that through this amalgam, the common royal and popular role of Nath yogis can become a viable urban institution. In his view, this dual institution can bring about a form of cohesion and a healthy coexistence of different communal sensibilities.

Ishita Banerjee-Dube's chapter traces the influence of Nath yoga and tantra on a religious sect of Orissa known as Mahima Dharma. This sect also has much in common with Nirguni movements such as the Kabir Panth. Mahima Dharma was founded in the 1860s by a celibate ascetic known as Mahima Swami. Like the Kabir Panthis, he rejected idol worship and many caste-based practices. Some of his ritual practices such as his celibacy and his use of the hearth-fire (*dhūni*), strongly suggest

Nath influence. He apparently also introduced the name *Alakh* or *Alekh* as the designation of the God of Mahima Dharma. This name is clearly borrowed from the Nath name of Shiva, *Alakh Niranjan*.

Mahima Swami's chief disciple and successor was a man named Bhima Bhoi. While Mahima Swami did not leave any written texts, Bhima Bhoi was a poet and religious thinker who wrote a great variety of songs, verses, and metaphysical texts. Banerjee-Dube here identifies the many Nath and tantric ideas present in the compositions of Bhima Bhoi. She also suggests that Bhima Bhoi's personal choice to live with several women and father children may have been related to his association with tantric ideas and practices. Among the Nath and tantric terms and ideas used by Bhima Bhoi, one of the most important is that of the relation between the human body (*pinḍa*), with the body of the universe, the *brahmāṇḍa*, a theme that can also be found in the chapter by David White on a Nath text that features this same relation.

The *Siddha-siddhānta-paddhati* discussed by White is a text attributed to Gorakhnath. It is especially concerned with Nath philosophy, physiology, and anatomy. The third chapter of this work, translated in White's essay, offers what he calls a "complete and detailed identification of the human body (*pinḍa*) with the universe of the 'Puranic' cosmic egg (*brahmāṇḍa*)." White makes the important point that this cannot really be called an identification of the human body as a microcosm of the macrocosmic universe. The body of the yogi is not described as a "miniaturized replica of the universal 'macrocosm.'" Rather his body is somehow identical to the universe. The full universe is located within the yogi's own body.

White further connects the ideas about the yogi's body found in the *Siddha-siddhānta-paddhati* with the discussions of the body (or multiple overlapping bodies) found in tantric sources such as Abhinavagupta and in the vernacular poetry of Gorakh. Finally, White ties these discussions to the ideas about the equivalence of the physical universe with the body of the cosmic man or Puruṣa, first found in Vedic sources, and with later ideas about the universe being contained within the body of God such as the description of the universe in Krishna found in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. The aim of all this speculation is evidently to enable the yogi to become Śiva's equal.

The Nath yogis have become a major icon in Indian folklore, bridging linguistic barriers. Throughout the Indian subcontinent, the yogis feature in a wide corpus of folktales. Whether all of these tales sprung from the yogis themselves or whether they were the elaboration of stories by others, they represent a key element of Indian folklore. Some of these tales reveal archetypal aspects of Nath personality and identity. Ann Gold has worked with oral Rajasthani/Hindi sources. Her important insights into Rajasthani folklore concerning Nath tradition are further devel-

oped in her essay here through a commentary on two Nath legends: those of Gopichand and Bharthari. In her analysis, Gold uncovers the anxieties of specific caste and religious communities. She reveals the way in which these tales are deeply embedded in the culture of rural Rajasthan and feature as leading characters, both merchants and artisans (potters). The Nath ascetics in the stories stress the contrast between the pursuit of the Ultimate Goal, i.e. Alakh Niranjana, and the ties of domestic life. One central motif in the two stories presented by Gold is that of fostering positive popular attitudes toward alms begging and alms giving.

In his chapter, Adrián Muñoz discusses a Hindi legend about Matsyendra and Gorakh and relates it to the larger body of Nath literature and uncovers unsuspected continuities in Nath literary production. Excerpts from Nath Sanskrit texts and from Nath Hindi poetry (*Gorakh-bānī*) are compared and contrasted. At the same time, Muñoz claims that narrative discrepancies among the texts possibly reveal ideological disputes experienced by competing Nath groups in different historical periods. Muñoz argues that the tale of Matsyendra's stay in the Kingdom of Women and his eventual release by Gorakh can be read as an allegory of a conscious agenda to forge a "cleansed" form of haṭha yoga and Nathism. This agenda was prominent in Nath poetry as well. In this way, a clear opposition between Kaulism (the tantric school traditionally attributed to Matsyendra) and Nathism was constructed. The key aim was to eliminate sexual rites from yoga practices. Nonetheless, the differing viewpoints found in the available Nath and haṭha-yoga texts seem to indicate a lack of any definitive institutional stance in the extended praxis of the siddhas and yogis.

In Muñoz's view, the historical Gorakh probably tried to expunge sexual practices from his own yogic school. In the end, the Nath Panth exorcised most directly sexual elements, but this was not necessarily done in haṭha yoga, a school that was not completely controlled by the Naths and had attained a much wider popularity. Haṭha-yoga practitioners were evidently able to retain or introduce sexual exercises in their religious practice. This would explain the problematic *vajrolī-mudrā*, an exercise described in the *Haṭhayoga-pradīpikā* that presupposes the active sexual participation of a woman and the emission of bodily fluids.

In his chapter, Lubomír Ondračka again discusses the efforts of Gorakh to rescue Matsyendra from sensual temptations, but bases his analysis on a Bengali version of the legend. In particular, Ondračka focuses on a key motif that lies at the very core of his Bengali text, namely the intriguing mention of four moons. According to this source, Gorakh claims that Matsyendra can escape death and decay by means of an esoteric practice employing these four moons. The identity of these four moons is precisely what Ondračka tries to elucidate. He relates the Bengali tale of Matsyendra to other religious practices found in Bengal, especially those of the

Sahajiyas. He discusses all available hypotheses and in particular addresses the question whether these moons represent esoteric or exterior ascetic processes, or even sexual fluids. This possibility suggests again a link with Kaula practices.

The chapter by Csaba Kiss discusses one of the intersecting points between Nathism and tantra. Focussing on the *Matsyendra-samhitā*, Kiss establishes links between tantric practice, especially that of a Shakta-oriented branch, and Nath praxis. This argument can be seen as highly controversial since most groups of the Nath Panth have made efforts to eradicate most traces of tantric religion. However, Matsyendra, Gorakh's former guru, is widely known as a reputed tantric teacher, and is said to have founded the Kaula-yoginī school, which is believed to have engaged in ritual sexual intercourse.

Kiss seeks to establish the connections of the *Matsyendra-samhitā* with other Kaula texts such as the *Brahma-yāmala*, the *Jayadratha-yāmala* and the *Tantra-sadbhāva*. The recurrent Kaula vocabulary is a major indication of this relation: words like *kula*, *kaula*, *kaulika* abound in the *Matsyendra-samhitā*. This text, in his view, belongs to a typical thirteenth-century Śaiva tantric/yogic environment. In particular, Kiss locates the *Matsyendra-samhitā* within the tradition of goddess Kubjikā's cult known as Śāmbhava. The Śāmbhava cult was especially popular in South India, hence the constant references to a Cola King in the *Matsyendra-samhitā*. Kiss then elaborates on the proper injunctions for yoginī (female yogi) worship as laid down in the text. In fact, the practices expounded in the *Matsyendra-samhitā* differ greatly from those of the most famous haṭha-yoga treatises. In the *Matsyendra-samhitā* we find rules for sexual practices and various meditations using skulls. Thus, the yoga of this Śāmbhava cult is definitely tantric and not necessarily that of the Naths.

Much more, of course, remains to be said about Gorakh and the Naths. The essays in this book give important glimpses of the ways in which the Naths historically have been a vital link between a large number of religious, metaphysical and even medical traditions in India. This philosophically and religiously Nath tradition is linked both to tantric and Nirguni religious currents, to Abhinavagupta and to Kabir. Through haṭha yoga, the Naths are also linked to the classical yoga of Patañjali, to Sufi adaptations of haṭha yoga beliefs and practices, and even to the worldwide spread of yoga exercise and meditation as aids to healthy living. In the case of Nath legends, these stories are still a vital part of the wider world of Indian folklore and offer an essential window on many basic social, metaphysical, and psychological concerns of Hindu culture. As the Naths say, "Alakh Niranjana."