

The Importance of Guru - Shishya Parampara in Nath panth

Review Article

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Abstract

The worship of Lord Shiva and the application of sophisticated yogic techniques are the main focuses of the *Nath Sampradaya* (also known as the Nath tradition), a spiritual and religious movement within Hinduism. The custom, which dates back to the eighth century, is strongly linked to mythical saints like *Matsyendranath* and *Gorakhnath*. It places a strong emphasis on using Hatha Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, and other meditation techniques to achieve self-realization, spiritual awakening, and liberation (Moksha). The Guru-disciple relationship, in which the Guru imparts spiritual wisdom and esoteric knowledge, is what defines the Nath tradition. Additionally, the tradition encourages the development of mental and physical discipline, asceticism, and the use of mantras. The Nath Sampradaya has influenced the development of various schools of yoga, and its teachings continue to impact Hindu philosophy, meditation practices, and spiritual literature across India and beyond.

Keywords: *Nath Sampradaya, Siva-cult, Adiyogi, Gorakhnath Temple, Nath-Yogi, Siddha-Yogi.*

Introduction

A South Asian religious order consisting of various ascetic "sorts" is commonly referred to as the *or Nath Panth*. This order is typically linked with yoga. There is householder castes associated with the *Naths*, although renunciates make up the majority of its adherents. Although there are branches in other areas as well, they are primarily found in the northern part of the Indian peninsula. The *GorakhNath* Mandir in Uttar Pradesh, India, is currently the most well-known and significant temple. It serves as both the *Nath* headquarters and the residence of Yogi Adityanath, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and the mahant of the *GorakhNath* Mandir. The people who follow the panth are commonly referred to as *Nath Yogis*, but in the literature that still exists and in folklore, they are also occasionally called jogis, which is the vernacular for *yogi siddhas*, or *avadhutas* which is another term for someone who has rejected the constraints of secular life. Additionally, the somewhat ambiguous term "*NathSiddhas*" is mentioned in some academic and indigenous texts(1).

The application of these and other names varies amongst sources and historical periods. There also appears to be a wide range in their actual meanings and denotations. According to James Mallinson's estimation, *Nath* literature did not use the term "*Nath Siddha*" until

the latter part of the 20th century (1). The two terms may have been combined due to a loose combination of Northern Yogis and Tamil Siddhas in some scholarship, or to the constant interaction of ascetics who used one name and then the other, without necessarily coming together into a single tradition, or sampradaya. Since the motif was a prominent element in some of the temples built by Man Singh of Mewar, we do know that by the nineteenth century, the authoritative status of a symbolic idea of a group of Nine *Naths* (not to mention that of the Eighty-Four *Siddhas*) was seemingly well established(2).

It is plausible that approximately during the 16th century, a cohort of *Saiva* ascetics started to gradually distinguish themselves from other related communities and employ the term *yogi* in a particular context, distinct from a general one.

The *Naths*, as they are popularly called, are deeply ingrained in a custom linked to the study and practice of yoga. *Haṭha yoga* is the specific style of yoga associated with the *Naths*, though this connection has been questioned in more recent research. In addition to being appropriate for a *Nath* province, *haṭha yoga* was also widely practiced by other ascetic communities. That being said, particularly in the last few years, the *Nath yoga* relationship has been crucial to the development of a *Nath* identity. Consequently, a significant portion of the literature associated with the *Nath Yogis* discusses *yoga*, and occasionally *haṭhayoga* in particular(1).

One intriguing aspect of the *Natha sampradaya* is that its imagery and ideology are drawn from three literary corpuses: folk tales, Sanskrit texts on yoga, and a variety of literature written in vernacular languages(2). In a way, the *Nath* tradition is predicated on how these three sources are interpreted. It is difficult

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to determine which *Nath* authors actually wrote the Sanskrit texts on *yoga*, but tradition has established a link between them, strengthening the yogic aspect symbolically. The primary genres of the vernacular literature are religious dialogues and poetry. The latter was produced mostly in the seventeenth century and is of a mystical and devotional nature. Its poetic style is similar to that of the *bhakti* verses written by the *Nirguni* poets of North India, who were particularly active in the second millennium. With the tales of archetypal personages like *Gorakh*, *Matsyendra*, *Gopicanand*, *Caurangi* and others, the legends of *Nath* renowned figures have been a potent means of disseminating the influence, aura, and appeal of the *Naths*. Ideally, there exists a roster of nine enlightened *Nath* Yogis, a cohort that occasionally functions similarly to the Eight-Four Siddhas(3).

This poem might not belong to the *Nath* but rather to a different fore, most likely *Nirguni*. Recognising that the Nine *Naths* and the Eighty-Four Siddhas belong together is crucial for our current goal. The fact that they both practice *yogic* postures, or *asanas*, is particularly noteworthy.

But *siddhas* and *yogis* are all grouped together, but only as vague groups, not as distinct communities of relatively concrete figures. Even older poetry contains references to individual Yogis and Siddhas by name, but not enough to draw any firm conclusions. The and *Caryapadas* the *Sadhanamala* from the approximately twelfth century do not include or mention *Gorakṣa*, *Caurangi*, *Nagarjuna*, *Carpaṭa*, *Kanthali*, *Kapala*, *Nagabodhi* or *Vyali*. However, the *Gorakṣasiddhanatasamgraha* from the eighteenth century provides the following account: *Adinatha*, *Matsyendranatha*, *Udayanatha*, *Dandanatha*, *Satyanatha*, *Santosnatha*, *Kurmanatha*, *Bhavanarji*, *Gorkshanatha*: these individuals make up the divine succession (*isvarasantanah*)(4). Does this refer to a family history or a custom.

Hāth yoga and Nath yoga

There are two main ways that we understand *yoga* generally: the scholarly way and the practitioner way. Though there is a difference between South Asian "traditional" practitioners and modern non-renouncer (often urban) practitioners, they may occasionally coincide. The scholarly method is based on textual sources, mostly composed in Sanskrit, but it also includes documents written in other languages from the eighteenth century onwards. Based on these sources, it seems that *hatha* yoga is not quite the same as what modern practitioners do in *yoga* studios all over the world (5). Compared to "textual" *hāthayoga*, contemporary *hāthayoga* places a lot more emphasis on physical postures (*asana*). Throughout ancient texts, the central idea of *hāthayoga* appears to have been breath control (*prāṇāyama*), which can be practiced in different ways (*mudra*, *bandha*) to become perfect(1). A *Nath* attribution to various *yoga* texts, usually written in Sanskrit, is what links the *Nath* Yogis to *hāthayoga*. It is not possible to determine with certainty that "*Nathas*"

wrote these texts. Nonetheless, a lot of them have been consistently released by *Nath* monasteries and presses, and this editing work has contributed to strengthening the connection (2). A few of the pertinent titles have already been mentioned once. *Gorakṣasataka*, *Vivekamartanda*, *Amaraughaprabodha*, *Yogabija*, *Amanaskayoga*, *Gorakṣasiddhantasamgraha*, and *Siddhasiddhantapaddhati* are some of the most famous texts; most of these have been credited to *Gorakh* or other fabled *Nath* Yogis. While they are related, some texts on *hāthayoga* (*Hāthapradipika*, *Gheraṇḍasamhita*, *Sivasamhita*) have not been attributed to the *Naths*; other works, though attributed to *Matsyendra*, do not deal directly with *hāthayoga* or the panth (*Kaulajnananirṇaya*, for instance) (3). The *Yoga Upaniṣads*, a collection of late Sanskrit texts on *yoga*, most likely have a significant influence from *hāthayoga*, though the precise amount of a potential *Nath* influence is not yet known. Furthermore, it is problematic to consider that many texts commonly associated with early *hāthayoga* fail to define their system as "*hātha*" Regarding the method used by the ascetic practitioners, there is an intriguing discrepancy between their comprehension of the text and that of the yogis. According to a recent ethnographic study, the meaning of *hāthayoga* varies among ascetics from different denominations, such as *Nagas*, *Ramanandis*, and *Nath* Yogis. *Hāthayoga* is not always a distinct *yoga* system; for many ascetics, it is nearly equivalent to general austerities (*tapas*). Due to its rigorous practices, *hāthayoga* is commonly understood by scholars as a "forceful *yoga*" (3). However, there is another widely accepted meaning that explains this *yoga* in a symbolic way. The combination of the syllables *HA* and *UHA*, which represent the sun and the moon, respectively, or the subtle channels within the yogic body, is *Hātha*. Thus, *hāthayoga* would mean the union of the two main breaths, which seems to be in accord with some pre-modern sources that lay stress on breath control (3). However, in a recent ethnographic study, just three out of eighty respondents referred to this symbolic, esoteric explanation of *hāthayoga*. Clearly, the idea that there is a harmonized continuity of *hāthayoga* and its transmission is put into question.

In general, *hāthayoga* imagery depends on an intense work with and on an energetic, subtle physiology. The yogic body is

In general, *hāthayoga* imagery depends on an intense work with and on an energetic, subtle physiology. The yogic body is commonly understood as a network of delicate *cakras*, *grānis*, and conduits (*naḍis*). The primary drive is to channel vital energies, specifically the *kuṇḍalini*, a potent life force that, when properly "awakened," can enhance unimaginable capacities and immortality, and the *prāṇa*, which is itself a rich network of breaths. In *hāthayoga*, there are two primary trends that can be distinguished. Since semen is symbolic of the seed of eternal life, the first and ostensibly older one focusses on the retention of

semen (*bindu*, *amṛta*). The second focusses on increasing *kuṇḍalini*, a subtle psychophysical force. The primary goal in both situations is to become successful, acquire extraordinary abilities (*siddhi*), and become free while remaining in the body. In this sense, liberation in this scheme is not otherworldly but asserted in the phenomenal realm. It should be noted that *haṭhayoga* seems to have first appeared in Buddhist tantric literature, and then later entered both *Saiva* and *Vaiṣṇava* texts that sometimes dealt with *raja yoga* (6).

It has been noted previously that the *Nath* attribution to the Sanskrit texts is uncertain, as is the actual relationship that the *Nath Yogis* had with *haṭhayoga* in pre-modern India. It has to be pointed out that some scholars (2). are working on visual evidence such as sculpture, miniature, and painting so as to ascertain that the *Naths* were the ascetics portrayed there in *asana* and *pranayama* practices (7). Whether these yogis were, in fact, *Nath Yogis* and not followers of some other ascetic order or lineage remains to be established, particularly since we do not yet know when the *Naths* started using their unique insignia as exclusively as they do now. Still, *haṭha* has emerged as a central figure in *Nath* imagery and tradition. It is interesting to note that the *yoga sthala* at Gorakhnath Mandir is staffed by laypeople rather than renunciate yogis or *Nath* ascetic teachers. Other *Nath* sites do not necessarily have to be like this. An illustrative leaflet published by the Gita Press and the Gorakhnath Mandir presents what appears to be an institutional position on yoga (4). This text is An Introduction to *Natha-Yoga* (INY from now on). Although the author and publication date are unknown, it was most likely published in the final decades of the 20th century with the intention of advancing the official interpretation of the *Naths'* yoga (5). The INY covers a wide range of yogic themes in thirty-one chapters and slightly less than one hundred pages, including philosophical ideas, physical practices, institutional locations, and aspects of worship. Generally speaking, the INY provides an overview of prior, accepted knowledge about yoga. It echoes the scriptures of *haṭhayoga* more strongly than *Patanjali*. Though the *Haṭhapradipika* is obviously not a *Nath* text, the atmosphere of *Svatmarama's* work lurks behind the exposition; it does not include quotes, direct references, or a bibliography (8).

While not all *Nath* ascetics adhere to the INY, it does represent an intentional effort to promote an ideal *Nath* image connected to *haṭhayoga*. Regardless of the historical accuracy, this association holds significance. Regardless, the historical stories have already portrayed the *Naths* as dominant because they were skilled in *yoga*.

A.K. Banerjea, who wrote a biography of *Baba Gambhir Nath*, a former mahant of the Gorakhpur Temple, and wrote other books on the *Naths*, including *The Philosophy of Gorakhnath*, published in 1962 and reprinted from time to time, is also worth considering. This is by no means a treatise on *yoga*, but one can still

learn something about the general understanding of *yoga* in relation to the Gorakhpur *Naths*.

Not surprisingly, Banerjea explains *yoga* as a system based on *Patanjali* philosophy. In this life story, *Gambhirnath* appears as a renunciant who had mastered all aspects from the reputed philosophical system. Yet, the young *Nathbaba* decided to undertake a long pilgrimage so as to further penetrate into the mysteries of *yoga*. In several pages, Banerjea speaks of "esoteric aspects of *yoga*", thus implying that some issues are not covered in the *sastras*. *Gambhirnath* was to spend a few years in Varanasi and Prayag intent on fully mastering *yoga*, although it rarely receives a qualifier—it usually just remains "*yoga*" in general. While *Gambhirnath's* biography touches on some forms of *yoga*, it does not advocate for anything known as "*Nath-Yoga*," unlike the INY previously discussed. It takes its cues straight from *Patanjali*, as mentioned earlier. Literally speaking, it also alludes to "*Karma-yoga*," which is described as "the well-regulated performance of various forms of work with one high ideal in view". This is appropriate because the biographer wants to portray his subject as a great devotee, or in this case, a "true *bhakta-sadhaka*," who not only claimed to be an infinite and unwavering devotee but also a renouncer who had accepted all of the *Nath* insignia, reverence and esteem for *Gopalnath*, his guru. *Gambhir Nath* was frequently depicted as ardently practicing "*yoga and deep meditation*," particularly "in certain solitary places."

While the term "*sadhaka*" is rarely used as a synonym for "*yogin*" in most *haṭha yogic* texts it is frequently used in Banerjea's biography of *Gambhirnath*, who is also referred to as *Yogiraj*, the king or conqueror of *yoga*. As Bevilacqua's study demonstrates, there is, in fact, a confusion of ideas about deeds, devotion, meditation, and energy control, not unlike the common understandings shared by other *sadhus* and *saṁnyasis*. The concept of *yoga* here negotiates with the ethos and praxis of various religious groups, just as the lists demonstrate its interaction with various *Vaiṣṇava*, *Saiva*, and Buddhist realms. However, the *Naths* continue to emphasise how they are different from other religious groups.

By contrasting these sources, we can observe a synthesis of various types: a renouncer motivated by devotion and an ascetic connected to *yoga*. While the second figure seems to be more passive and is fully engrossed in religious meditation, the first can be perceived as highly energising and endowed with numerous supernatural abilities. There appears to be a negotiation going on between a later, pious halo of *sant*-like ethos and a former, powerful, tantric aura. The Vedic ṛṣis and other related figures are not considered the key figures for the *Nirguni* poets. Nor are they intended for *Nath Yogis*. The semi-legendary *Nath Siddhas*, who have inhabited the public consciousness for several centuries, are considered to be the primary figures. The panth was founded by the divine expounder of *yoga's* secret lore, *Sdinatha/Siva*, who is the only exception. Every teacher since *Ṣiva* has been a human being with a purported historical

background. Their poses are flawless. However, in contrast to certain *Nirguni* Sants, the *Nath* Geographical narratives lack the biographical details necessary to accurately situate these characters in space and time. It is important for us to understand that *Nath* historiography rarely deals with certainty. If there is a difference between the *Naths* and the *Nirgunis* in this aspect, it is because the *Naths* are not exactly sants; rather, they are similar to most Sants but never the same. Rather, the *Nath* Yogis function as proto-*Nirgunis* in some sense (perhaps through oral or minstrel traditions), since they foresee the kind of popular poetry that would appeal to the masses and would exhibit a set of mystical meanings distinct from those of *Brahmanic* and Islamic orthodoxy(6).

It appeared that the *Naths* had created a tradition (*sampradaya*) and a sect (panth), but not a definitive spiritual lineage (*parampara*). That helps partially account for the stark differences between the lists. It certainly also demonstrates the early order's lack of denominational identity and cohesiveness. The yogis in premodern India were not merely accepting their elder models without question; rather, they were challenging them in order to define and set themselves apart from other lineages(6). More significantly, the different lists attest to an amalgamation of varied regional traditions that occasionally clash but also occasionally blend into one another. Understanding *Nath* historiography requires an understanding of the *Naths* identity and kinship, even though these topics are still up for debate regarding names and numbers. Specifically, the Gorakhpur-affiliated *Nath* lineage has been determined to establish the Gorakhnath Mandir as a prominent hub for yogis; they have attempted to transform it into the *Nath* capital, if you will. The Gorakhnath Mandir has attempted to strengthen their connection to an all-powerful yoga and to augment a spiritual legacy by promoting the sacred biographies of the legendary yogis. Additionally, by highlighting the lives and deeds of their former mahants, the temple has strengthened its spiritual lineage and its importance within the South Asian yogic community. We found the following in a Gorakhnath Temple publication:

The soil, water, and air of the area become saturated with their influence when those spiritual vibrations are produced by the *sadhana* and *siddhi* of a long line of spiritually great men from ancient times. They become eternal, inexhaustible, and indestructible. This is true for the majority of locations that are revered. In fact, the Temple's propagandistic efforts aim to elevate Gorakhpur's soil to the same sacred and

meritorious status as any other well-known Hindu pilgrimage site. They benefit from their previous yogi leaders and gurus' success (*siddhi*).

Conclusion

A variety of vast literature that talks about these '*Nath-Yogis*' and the principles and practices of '*Yoga*', are available in Sanskrit. Guru Gorakhnath, himself is reputed to be author of great treatise like, *Gorasha-Sanhita Goraksha-Satak*, *Yoga-Siddhanata-Paddhati*, *Siddha-Siddhanta-paddhati*, *Hatha-Yoga*, *Jnanamrita* and many other Sanskrit texts. Some other important books on Yoga, whose author is believed to be the member of the sect includes '*Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika*', '*Siva-Samhita*' and '*Gheranda-Samhita*'. While '*Goraksha-Shinita*', '*Goraksha- Kaumundi*', '*Goraksha- Saharsranama*', '*Yoga-Sangraha*', *Yoga-Manjari*' are some works based on the teachings of Gorakhnath.

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