

# Natha Pantha: Order of the Primordial Shiva

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(Continued from the previous issue)

BESIDES MATSYENDRANATHA and Gorakhanatha, the most distinguished exponent of the Natha order of ascetics was Jalandharanatha—called Hadipa or Hadi-pa in Bengal—a disciple of Matsyendranatha.

## **Jalandharanatha and other Nathas**

According to one tradition, Jalandharanatha was a *hādi*, sweeper, in the palace of the widowed Queen Mayanamati of Patika, but acquired royal status due to his miraculous powers, which he had acquired through intense spiritual practices. He infused life into the corpse of the queen's daughter Champadei and prevailed upon the queen's recalcitrant son Gopichandra to follow him. He could also make Mayanamati speak to her dead husband, Manikachandra. Another tradition has it that he is among the five Adi Siddhas, chief saints, who emerged out of the mirific ashes of Adinatha.<sup>17</sup> Jalandhar City in Punjab, mythologically named after the demon Jalandhar, is historically known because of Jalandharanatha. His memorial was demolished by Muslims to construct the Imam Nasir Mausoleum (twelfth-thirteenth century) in the heart of the old city. Jalandharanatha initiated *bandha*, a yogic lock involving contraction of the throat by pressing the chin firmly on the chest, and it came to be known after him as *jalandhara bandha*. Kanu-pa—Krishna-pada, Kana-pa—a Kapalika Shaiva poet of strong mystical leanings who had also been in contact with Gorakhanatha, was among his disciples.

Chauranginatha and Dharmanatha, disciples of Matsyendranatha; Charpatanatha and Gahininatha, disciples of Gorakhanatha; Gopichandra, disciple of Jalandharanatha; and Bhartrihari, disciple of Gorakhanatha or Jalandharanatha, were among other perfected Natha yogis who became popular among Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims alike due to their miraculous powers and austere lives. Nityanatha (fifteenth century) set new benchmarks in the science of longevity, *āyurveda*, by composing *Rasaratnakara*, the monumental work dealing with non-mercurial metallic compounds, mercurial preparations, therapeutic actions, and rejuvenating effects of such preparations. In course of time a number of *panthas*, Natha lineages, grew after the names of adepts and their disciples, often differing from one another due to regional variations or the impact of prevalent sects or creeds.

Some of the early Natha teachers came to be associated with the royal household: Jalandharanatha held sway over Hastinapura in Uttar Pradesh, the ancient capital of the Kuru dynasty; Gopichandra over East Bengal, now Bangladesh; and Bhartrihari over Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh. Champadei was the spouse of the king of Bengal. Chauranginatha was the abandoned child of King Devapala of Bengal. *Prana-sankali*, a Natha text dealing with the control and regulation of the vital energy in a person, is attributed to Chauranginatha. Sahil Varma, king of Chamba, was a disciple of Charpatanatha and

is credited with the authorship of *Charpata-shataka*—or *Charpata-paddhati*—‘which shows a strong Jaina influence.’<sup>18</sup>

A sect of yogis came to be known after King Bhartrihari, who wore ‘the garments of the bark of trees’ and wandered with the name of Shiva on his lips, drawing his inspiration from ‘the murmuring brooks and the bubbling springs’. The wandering minstrels of the Natha or yogi tradition recite the songs of Bhartrihari as they play on stringed or percussion instruments, emphasizing the glory of the Divine Name, the transitoriness of the world, and the need for God realization. They wake up people in early morning hours singing soulful melodies and say *alakh nirañjan*, synonym for God without attributes, when approaching them. They wear ochre-coloured unstitched robes and remain on the move from place to place carrying a *jholā*, wide open bag, on their shoulders. They depend on alms for their daily subsistence and are against accumulating money or material goods. They are familiar with Bhartrihari’s works—*Sringara-shataka*, *Niti-shataka*, and *Vairagya-shataka*—but recite only the last one dealing with dispassion and often disregard the first two relating to love and politics respectively.<sup>19</sup> Some Nathas pay obeisance to the sage Markandeya, a devotee of Shiva who tried to conquer death, and to mother goddesses—like Amba, Shabari Devi, Vindhya-vasini, or Balasundari—or appease the *navagrahas*, nine planets, particularly Shani (Saturn) by adopting what they call *yogamaya-pujā-paddhati*, the technique of yoga-based worship. But they are few in number and do not strictly belong to the orthodox Natha sect.

### The Natha Impact

The Nathas lived in mountain-caves, dense forests, solitary places near riverbanks, or in hermitages for ascetic practices—called *ekānta* sadhana—

surviving on tubers, roots, and fruits. With the growth in their following, Natha monasteries came into existence. The first such monastery was built in the Deccan on top of the Kadri hill, overlooking the Manjunatha shrine in Mangalore, Karnataka, by Kundavarma Bhupendra of the Alupas’ lineage (tenth-eleventh century). The Nathas exchanged notes with Qalandars and Sufis like Hamidu’d-Din Nagauri (d.1274 CE) and Faridu’d-Din Ganj-I Shankar—better known as Baba Farid (d.1265 CE)—and with the Sikh Guru Nanak Dev (1469–1539). *Siddh Gosht*, a dialogue of Guru Nanak Dev with Siddhas—namely, Bhanganatha, Charpata, and Loharipa—finds an eloquent mention in Sri Guru Granth Sahib (Ramakali Mahala 1, 938–40). Some verses in *Gorakhabani* deride the Qazis for mechanically reciting the *Kalima*, ignoring its deep meaning.<sup>20</sup>

The ethical precepts of the Nathas, as opposed to the left-handed tantra ascetics, impressed eminent Sufis like Sheikh Ahmad ‘Abdu’l-Haqq of Rudauli Shariff—Faizabad district, Uttar Pradesh (352). Many liberal Muslims who concurred with Malik Muhammad Ja’isi (b. 1494–5) that Gorakhanatha and the Siddhas were like divine messengers (369), became converts to Nathism in medieval times, when Muslim rulers were harsh on the Hindus. The pontiffs of a few Natha hermitages came to be known by the Sufi epithet of Pir or Murshid, which means ‘spiritual teacher’. Muslim scholars like Sheikh Chand (c.1650–1725) and Abdu’l Hakim (1620–90) highlighted common points between Sufi and Natha beliefs. While the former wrote *Hara-gouri Sambad*—a *samvada*, dialogue, between Shiva (Hara) and Parvati (Gauri), about the secret spiritual doctrines—the latter juxtaposed yoga chakras with their counterparts in Sufism in his epic *Chari-Maqamer Bhed* (352). Shaikh ‘Abdu’l Quddus Gangohi (1456–1537), better known as Alakh, explained Natha beliefs in his

Hindi poems. Like the Nathas he emphasised that *śabda*, the divine word, is the mainstay of everything that exists and that the Sufis must 'absorb themselves in Onkar through *zīkr* [recollection]'. There are six references to either Gorakhanath, Shri Gorakh, Nath, or 'O! Nath' in his *Alakhbani* or *Rushd-Nama*. He found proximity between the metaphysical beliefs of the Nathas and the Sufi concept of the unity of Being—*Wahdat al-Wuzud*—(336–9, 343). Kabir spoke highly of Natha teachers like Gorakhanatha, Bhartrihari, and Gopichandra, who were experts in *śabda-yoga*, the yoga of sound, and the technique of *ṣatcakra-bhedanagubhyavidyā*, the mystic knowledge of piercing the six nerve-plexuses, or *kundalini śakti*, wheels of the serpent power.<sup>21</sup>

In the Virashaiva literature, there are references to Gorakhanatha's debates with Allama Prabhu and Revanasiddheshvara.<sup>22</sup> The view that the former was humbled twice seems to be an exaggeration, since such a defeat would have caused a furor in religious circles and would have been widely mentioned in contemporary literature. Similarly, the account of Gorakhanatha's failed attempts to win over Baba Balakanatha, the child-*siddha* of Chakmoli in Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh, who was a disciple of Dattatreya—or Datta guru, the combined manifestation of the Hindu trinity Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—as described in some legends of North India, has a sectarian orientation. The *Khulasatu-T-Tawarikh*,<sup>23</sup> a late seventeenth century work, does not mention any meeting between Balakanatha and Gorakhanatha, as it does in the case of Baba Lal and Dara Shukoh. The Tilah of Balanatha, lying at a distance of '7 kos from the fort of Rohtas' is described in this work as 'a cave of austerities', and a meeting point of yogis during the Shivaratri festival. Another medieval text, the *Chahar Gulshan*, lists the Tilah of Balanatha

among the Hindu shrines in Punjab, but does not allude to any meeting between the Natha stalwarts. The popular claim of Nathas and Siddha yogis, as recorded in *Dabistan-i-Mazahib*, that the Prophet Muhammad was a disciple of Gorakhanatha in his form as Baba Ratan Hajji, who still has followers in Kabul, Afghanistan,<sup>24</sup> is mythopoeic and unhistorical.

Jalandharanatha and Bhartrihari strengthened the Natha cult particularly in North India, Chauranginatha in Bengal and the eastern region, Dharmanatha in Gujarat, Charpatanatha in the Himalayan region, and Gahininatha in western India. Gahininatha initiated Nivrattinatha, who in turn initiated his brothers Jnaneshvara and Sopandeva, and sister Muktabai into the religious order. Jnaneshvara proved to be the greatest saint of Maharashtra, and his kin Nivratti, Sopan, and Muktabai emerged as highly evolved souls. Together they brought about a spiritual transformation by combining the way of knowledge and the way of devotion and by regarding Shiva and Vishnu as aspects of the same supreme Reality, which can be experienced by anyone.

Prominent Natha teachers like Matsyendra, Gorakha, Chaurangi, Jalandhara, and Charpati—or Charbaripa—figure in the list of the eighty-four Siddhas of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.<sup>25</sup> Their names also find mention in the mystic tradition of Nepal. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1.5–8) provides a select list of adepts in *hatha-vidyā*, which includes, besides the main Natha teachers, the names of Allama Prabhudeva, Ananda Bhairava, Bhanuki, Buddha, Kapalika, Kapali, Karantaka, Niranjana, Nityanatha, Tintini, Vindunatha, Virupaksha, and others. Places and spots consecrated by Nathas are scattered, even today, throughout Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Karnataka, but they are mostly in bad shape

or have been encroached upon for private use. It is common knowledge that some Muslim peasants of Tripura, in north-east India, continue to revere the Natha trinity Matsyendra, Gorakha, and Jalandhara in their evening prayers. During the census of 1901 45,463 persons described themselves as Nathas.<sup>26</sup> But their number as a religious community seems to be on the decline due to change in the mental culture of people, who cannot afford to follow ascetic practices or observe strict ethical discipline.

Interest in the Siddha Siddhanta doctrine of the Nathas is, however, on the increase and, according to one survey, there are perhaps 750,000 adherents of the school 'who are often understood as Śāktas or *advaita tantrics*.'<sup>27</sup> The number of Natha ascetics is going down, as is evident from the fact that the majority of their ashramas or hermitages, at least in Punjab, wear a deserted look. The places hallowed by the presence of Nathas have become abodes of ritualistic worship rather than centres for spiritual illumination through traditional practices.

This author has noted the presence of the Natha community in a number of villages in Solapur district of Maharashtra. They are householders, proud of their heritage but ignorant of

the Natha esoteric doctrines like Shatchakra-bhedana or Kundalini-jagarana. They worship Guru Gorakhanatha and other Natha preceptors as the Varkaris worship Vitthala, and avoid meat and intoxicating beverages. They make pilgrimages to the sacred places of Shaivas and Vaishnavas alike and have little understanding of the metaphysical subtleties that distinguish the Natha doctrine from others.

The major shrines of the Nathas in Maharashtra are those of Siddhanatha at Kharsundi, Atapadi taluk, Sangli district; Bhoja-linga at Varkute, Dahivadi taluk, Satara district; Natha Baba at Karunde, near Natepute, Solapur district; Bhairavanatha at Abapuri, Satara district, and at Sonari, Paranda taluk, Osmanabad district; and Lakshmi at Manegaon, Sangola taluk, Solapur district. How could Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu, enter the pantheon of the Natha yogis is not known. It appears that devotion to the goddess of prosperity has a certain local base and it does not reflect a change in the beliefs of the Nathas. It may also be an intermingling of Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions, of which we find many examples in Maharashtra and Karnataka. Natha Panthi, Nath Jogi, and Masan Jogi figure in the category of Nomadic Tribes in

*Vedic education by a  
Natha Pantha guru  
at Nath Shakti Pith,  
Maharashtra*



Maharashtra, while Jogis are included in Other Backward Castes as per Maharashtra government's list of castes.<sup>28</sup>

The Natha yogis as a separate class of religious mendicants, called Jugi in Bengal, are not held in respect today.<sup>29</sup> However, the high ideals, renunciatory outlook, and the yogic feats of the Nathas continue to be a part of the Bengali folklore and tradition.



### Notes and References

17. 'Mīna Nātha sprang from the navel; Gorakṣa Nātha came out of the skull (according to other versions, from *ghor* or filth, whether sweat or dung); Hāḍi-pā originated from the bones; Kānu-pā was born from the ears; and Cauraṅgī Nātha came out of the feet'—see 'The Nātha Cult', 282.
18. See *The Yoga Tradition, Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice*, 513–16; and 'The Nātha Cult', 285.
19. For an English translation of select verses of *Vairagya-shataka* see Lal Gopal Mukerji and Bankey Behari, *Songs from Bhartrihari* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1999), 1–6. The life of Bhartrihari is shrouded in myths and legends. Mukerji and Bankey Behari believe that Bhartrihari flourished about the first or second century CE. He was fortunate in having for his minister his own brother, the well-known Vikramaditya, after whom we have the Vikram Era (viii). Swami Harshananda places Bhartrihari, the author of three well-known Shatakas, 'One Hundred Verses', somewhere between 100 BCE and 500 CE—see *Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*, 1.285. Georg Feuerstein mentions that Vikramaditya—Chandragupta—ruled from 1079 to 1126 CE after his brother Bhartrihari abdicated the throne—see *The Yoga Tradition*, 514. In fact, Chandragupta II belongs to a much earlier period: fourth-fifth century CE. Bhartrihari's date requires further historical scrutiny, but the existence of Bhartrihari, the king turned Natha yogi during the early phase of the second millennium of the Christian Era cannot be denied. Who actually wrote the popular Shatakas, whether the grammarian Bhartrihari with Buddhist leanings who belonged to the fifth century or the one who belonged to the Natha-Bhartrihari who emerged about six centuries later—is another question that shall remain unresolved till new facts are discovered. It may, however, be said that the Natha-Bhartrihari lives in the soulful songs that he wrote in moments of dispassion and detachment resulting from his wife's clandestine acts of immorality.
20. *A History of Sufism in India*, 1.333, 339.
21. *The Yoga Tradition, Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice*, 513.
22. R Blake Michael, *The Origins of Viraśaiva Sects* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992), 56–7. Gorakha made a show of his adamant body, which could not be pierced by any weapon. Allama Prabhu in reply asked him to pass a sword through his body. The weapon penetrated as if it were passing through vacant space. When asked about the secret of this miracle Allama replied that 'Māyā becomes frozen as does the body and when the body and the māyā both become frozen, shadow forms appear as real, and the body and the mind appear as one' (ibid.).
23. Vide Jadunath Sarkar's translation.
24. *A History of Sufism in India*, 1.354; *The Yoga Tradition, Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice*, 514.
25. For the names of the eighty-four Siddhas see P C Bagchi, 'The Cult of the Buddhist Siddhacaryas' in *Studies on the Tantras*, 102–3. According to one account, the category of *navanātha*, nine Natha teachers, includes: Gorakhanatha, Jwalendranatha, Karinanatha, Gahininatha, Charpatanatha, Revananatha, Naganatha, Bhartrinatha, and Gopichandranatha—see Bhagavataprasadsinghji, 'Caurāsī Siddha Tatha Nātha Sampradāya', *Kalyāṇa*, 'Yoganka', 468–72. The Vajrayana school of tantric Mahayana Buddhism accepts the early Natha Siddhas other than Gorakha as its own masters—see 'The Nātha Cult', 286.
26. *Gorakhnāth and the Kanphaṭa Yogīs*, 23.
27. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami, *Dancing with Śiva: Hinduism's Contemporary Catechism* (Hawaii: Himalaya Academy, 1993), 816.
28. See *Arakshana Sandarbhatil Mahatvache va Nivadak Shashakiya Adesha* (Kolhapur: Shivaji Vidyapitha, 1999), 180, 184.
29. 'The Nātha Cult', 280.