

Natha Pantha: Order of the Primordial Shiva

Dr Satish K Kapoor

WHILE PASHUPATA SHAIVAS, Lakulishas, Kapalikas, and Kalamukhas were progressively losing contact with people during the first half of the second millennium, Natha Pantha—presumably originated in north and north-east Bengal—spread across India.

Natha Pantha is also known as Adinatha Sampradaya, 'Order of the Primordial Shiva', Yogi Pantha, 'Order of Yogis'—Kanaphata (split-eared) yogis or Siddha (realized) yogis—Goraksha Pantha, 'Sect of Goraksha (or Gorakha)', or Siddha Siddhanta Padyati, 'Methods and Principles of Realized Ones'.

Natha Pantha remained popular throughout the previous millennium and was influenced, to some extent, by the austere tantra doctrines of the Shaiva, Shakta, Sahajiya, Siddha Baul, and Bauddha traditions.¹ Yet Nathas—*natha* means lord, master, or protector—distinguished themselves by their unitive metaphysics; high standard of morality; prohibition of *madya* and *māmsa*, liquor and animal food; mastery over asanas, yogic postures, and *prāṇa*, vital breath; extraordinary control over mind and body; herbal or alchemical knowledge; magical or mystical feats; powers of benefaction; and the ability to communicate with plants and animals as well as to predict future events. In course of time magicians, sorcerers, snake-charmers, wandering ascetics with wonder-drugs, and many more who worshipped Shiva or practised yoga came to its fold. But all of them did not wear

big earrings—*mudrā* or *karṇa-kundala*—or aim at spiritual realization. The Nathas did not posit God outside the creation and believed that each human is perfect, though only a few could realize this fact.

For Natha Panthis the supreme master of all is Shiva—also called Adinatha, from whom everything ensues, than whom nothing is greater, and without whom none can experience bliss. The Nathas were different from Kapalikas, Mattamayuras, and Aghoris as they did not indulge in gory practices like *śava-sādhanā*, spiritual practice on a corpse—mentioned in the *Kaulavali Nirmaya* (14.75–260), the *Kulachudamani* (6.19–28), and other tantric texts—or observe the *pañcamakāra*, practice of the five 'M's, as opposed to *vedācāra*, Vedic rules of conduct. They disapproved of such obnoxious rites as *mārana*, killing, *uccāṭana*, disturbing others, *haraṇa*, carrying away, and *stambhana*, preventing others from doing something, commonly observed by left-handed sects. The Nathas affirmed that the human body is a miniature universe that must not be neglected or polluted by wicked thoughts or immoral actions. Hence, they advocated the strengthening of the body, like the thunderbolt of Indra, through the practice of *kāya-sādhanā*,² involving control over breath, the senses, and the mind as well as the use of alchemical preparations, specially those related to mercury and sulphur—symbolically associated with Shiva and Shakti—as also herbal drugs like bilva (*Aegle marmelos*), haritaki (*Terminalia*

chebula), vibhitaka (*Terminalia belerica*), amla, (*Embllica officinalis*), mundi (*Sphaeranthus indicus*), amritavalli (*Tinospora cordifolia*), palasha (*Buteamonosperma*), and many more. The Nathas presented an integrated system of physical, mental, moral, and spiritual culture that can help one to savour the divine elixir stored in the *brahmarandhra*, aperture in the crown of the head.

Matsyendranatha: The First Human Guru

The historical founder of Natha Pantha was Matsyendranatha—in common parlance, Macchendra—(tenth century CE), mythically believed to have been born out of the womb of a *matsya*, fish. He has been identified with the mystic Luyi-pada—Lui-pa meaning fish—of Tibet and Avalokiteshvara Padmapani of the Buddhist tradition. The *Kaula-jnana-nirnaya*, ‘Judgement of Kaula-knowledge’, an outstanding Buddhist tantra of Bengal, and the *Akula-viratantra*, a Shakta text delving on the Shiva aspect of Shakti for lower grade tantric aspirants, have been attributed to him.³

Hatha-vidyā, the knowledge of hatha yoga, leading the aspirant to ‘the highest raja yoga’ is ascribed to Adinatha (Shiva) in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1.2) by Yogi Swatmarama (fifteenth-sixteenth century), disciple of Shrinatha. Matsyendranatha, the first human guru, evolved techniques for bringing the body under conscious control by asanas; *mudrās*, seals; *bandhas*, body locks; *prāṇāyāma*, breathing techniques to control *prāṇa*, vital power; and *bhūta-śuddhi*, purification of the five elements constituting the gross body.

As Matsyendranatha experimented with such difficult practices as the *khecarī mudra*—*khe* is *ākāśa*, sky, and *carī* means to move—in which the tendon of the tongue is cut little by little, for about six months, and lengthened till

it reaches up to the forehead⁴ and then turned upwards and backwards with focused vision to partake of the divine nectar; the *vajrolī mudrā*, in which one draws back the seminal fluid or sucks liquids—even mercury—through the urethra;⁵ or the *plāvini kumbhaka*, in which breath is so retained as to enable one to walk on water or live exclusively on air.⁶ His doctrine became popular as forced, *haṭha*, yoga. Asanas like *matsyendrāsana*, ‘fish-pose’; *ardha*, ‘half-pose’, *matsyendrāsana*; and *matsyāsana*, useful in curing a number of diseases like constipation, rheumatism, and diabetes are known after him.

In strictly orthodox terms hatha yoga is the method of uniting the two life-sustaining currents—the sun-breath (*ha*) flowing through the *pingalā*, right nostril, and the moon-breath (*thā*) flowing through the *idā*, left nostril—with the ultimate aim of making both of them flow through the *susūmnā*, principal conduit, between *idā* and *pingalā*, for the awakening of *kundalīni śakti*, serpent power, lying in a dormant state at the base of the spine. The kundalīni has three and a half coils like a serpent, representing the qualities of *sattva*, purity, *rajas*, passion, and *tamas*, inertia; the half coil symbolises the modifications of Prakriti.⁷

Matsyendranatha earned wide popularity in Nepal, North India, Bengal and Assam, and parts of South India too; he prepared the ground for the proliferation of his sect by grooming a number of disciples, the most notable among them being Gorakhanatha. Reverentially called Karunamaya, ‘full of compassion’, Matsyendranatha is regarded as the patron deity of the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal. Two famous shrines dedicated to him in the capital city of Kathmandu are those of Rato (red) Machindranatha and Seto (white) Machindranatha. The chariot-pulling festival of Seto Machindranatha from Bungamati to Patan

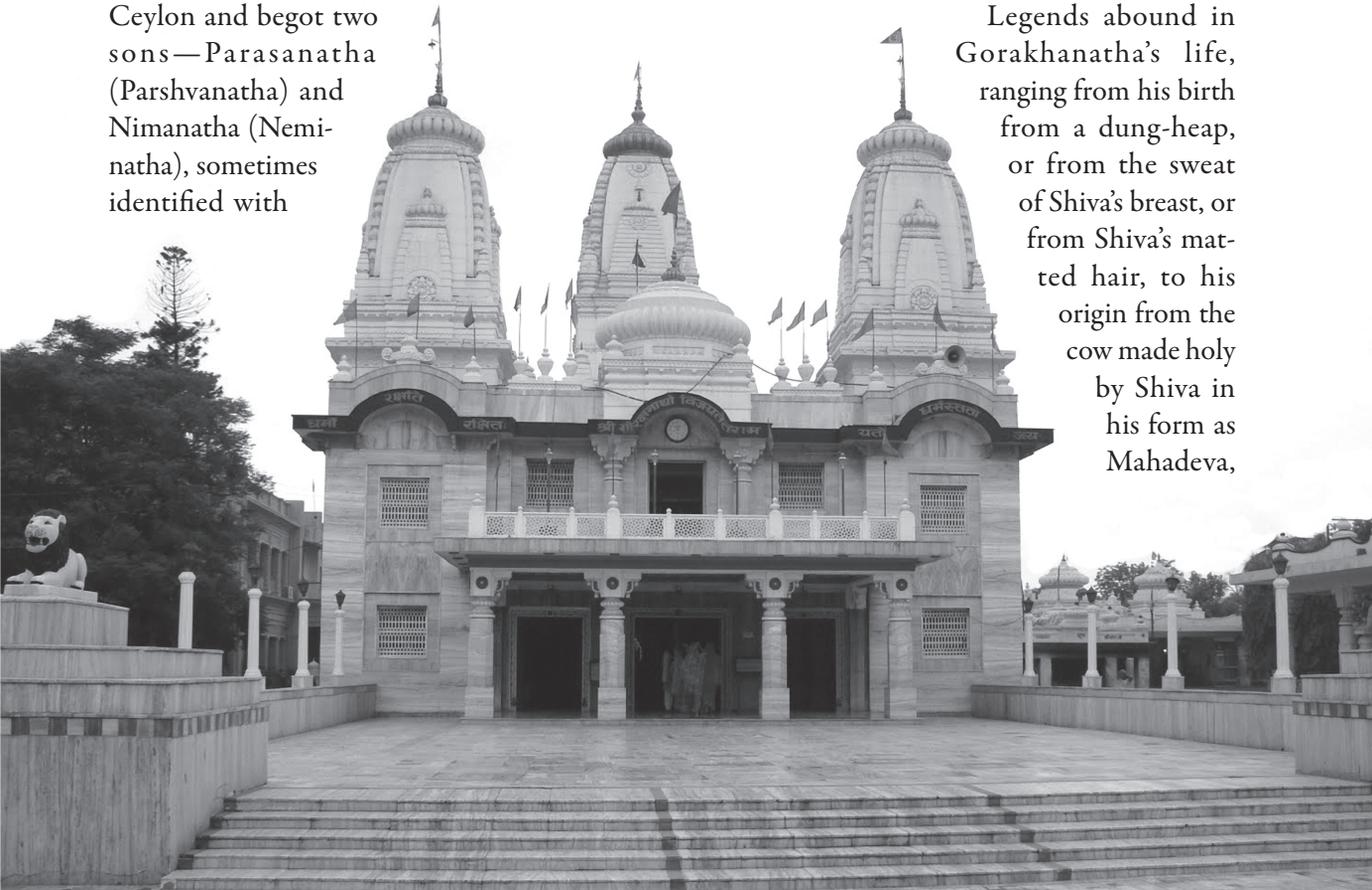
takes place every twelve years, like the Mahakumbha, the biggest religious fair of Hindus in India.

Gorakhanatha: Preceptor of His Preceptor

Gorakhanatha—Gorakha or Gorakshanatha, ‘Lord who protects cows’—outshone his preceptor in spiritual and esoteric practices that help one gain such mystical powers as invisibility, lightness, immunity from weapons, magnification, metabolic and psychic control over oneself, and the ability to separate the astral from the physical body and move about in the sky. According to tradition, Gorakhanatha saved his guru from further moral depravity when the latter became enamoured of the queen of Ceylon and begot two sons—Parasanatha (Parshvanatha) and Nimanatha (Neminatha), sometimes identified with

the Tirthankaras of Jainism.⁸ That precisely explains why Gorakhanatha is regarded as the preceptor of his preceptor in the folk tradition of Bengal. Gorakhanatha popularized hatha yoga in a rechristened form, adhering to the original doctrine of the sage Patanjali (c.200 BCE), which emphasises the discipline of the body and the mind through observance of *yama* and *niyama*, ethical precepts; *āsana*, right posture; *prāṇāyāma*, breath regulation; *pratyāhāra*, withdrawal from sensory objects; *dhāraṇā*, concentration; and *dhyānā*, meditation, to achieve *samādhi*, union (yoga) with the Divine Being. Ironically, *Goraksha-shataka*, ‘Hundred verses of Gorakha’, excludes *yama* and *niyama*, the first two aspects of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*, although these are religiously observed by the Nathas.

Legends abound in Gorakhanatha’s life, ranging from his birth from a dung-heap, or from the sweat of Shiva’s breast, or from Shiva’s matted hair, to his origin from the cow made holy by Shiva in his form as Mahadeva,



‘Great God’. His date of birth has been placed by Briggs around the thirteenth century—which seems to be incorrect since had it been so he could not have met Allama Prabhu, the Virashaiva mystic and poet belonging to the twelfth century.⁹ As per the North Indian tradition, he was born somewhere in Punjab in the eleventh or twelfth century, but his name became a household word due to his parapsychological faculties.

Gorakhanatha observed extreme physical and mental austerities to conserve his *prāṇa śakti*, vital power, and became a *mahāsiddha*, accomplished yogi. The tradition of making an incision in the cartilage of the ear for wearing large rings, as part of the initiatory rites of the Nathas, started with him. The ear-piercing ritual derives its origin from the Vedic *karnabedha samskāra*, rite performed during childhood to make children immune from malefic influence or diseases like hernia and enlargement of testis, a fact substantiated by the *Susbruta Samhita* (19.21). The Nathas believe that split ears render them more receptive to ‘the etheric nuances of unstruck sound’—*anāhata nāda*—that no one else can listen to.¹⁰

The popular hatha yoga, raja yoga, laya yoga, kundalini yoga, dhyana yoga, mantra yoga, or nada yoga preached today by Hindu religious sects in various forms owe a lot to Gorakhanatha’s injunctions as recorded by Yogi Swatmarama.¹¹ Gorakhanatha prescribed *anāhata-nāda*, the practice of listening to the eternal sound vibrating in each person, for those spiritual aspirants who could not follow the path of knowledge, known as jnana yoga. Sitting without encumbrances in *muktāsana*—also called *gorakṣāsana*—and with open eyes, as in *śāmbhavī-mudrā*, one could hear the sound of cosmic vibration through one’s right ear (4.64–6). One could further contemplate on

the space between the eyebrows, in the *ājñā cakra*, for achieving the blissful *unmani* state. *Laya*, vibration, produced by *nāda*, at once gives an experience of spiritual powers (4.79). *Laya* makes one forgetful of the objects of the senses. The mind is the master of the senses, and the breath is the master of the mind. The breath, in its turn, is subordinate to *laya*, absorption, and that *laya* depends on the *nāda* (4.29, 33). ‘Just as a bee, drinking sweet juice, does not care for the smell of the flower; so the mind, absorbed in *nāda*, does not desire the objects of enjoyment’ (4.89). Gorakhanatha thus used the principle of sound to stabilize the mind and tune it with the cosmic Being.

Gorakhanatha travelled widely in India and abroad, from Punjab, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh to Bengal and Assam, from Maharashtra and Karnataka to the southernmost parts, reaching as far as Ceylon. Peshawar, now in Pakistan, was the hub of his activities and from where he went to South and South Central Asia.¹² He sojourned in Nepal, Sindh, Afghanistan, Baluchistan, and Iran delineating how one can attain immortality by purity of thought, self-control, detachment from worldly affairs, and the practice of yoga under the guidance of a guru.

As the physical body is the prime vehicle for the discharge of human activities, he advised spiritual aspirants to take pure, fresh, and nutritious food of the sattvic type, strictly avoiding intoxicating liquors, fish, meat, garlic, onions, minor grains, or such substances as are too bitter, sour, saltish, hot, or that cause a burning sensation. To check the distractions of the mind he exhorted travellers on the yogic path to shun the company of women and the evil-minded. Charting a practical approach to the realization of the transcendental Shiva and to achieve liberation while living, he suggested

constant and vigilant practice, keeping aside laziness and the pedagogy of yogic discipline.¹³ To quote him: 'Success cannot be attained by adopting a particular dress. It cannot be gained by telling tales. Practice alone is the means to success. This is true, there is no doubt' (1.68).

For awakening Parameshvari, 'the Great Goddess'—also called Bhujangi, 'a she-serpent', Shakti, 'power', Ishvari, 'of the nature of God', Kundali, 'of a bent shape', or Arundhati, a Vedic goddess—he suggested yogis to observe brahmacharya, continence, and always eat sparingly while following the procedure of *śakti-cālana*, flow of energy (3.97–123).¹⁴

Several sites, temples, *tapasthalis*—places for ascetic practices—hermitages, monasteries, and hillocks commemorate Gorakhanatha's name. For example, Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh; Gorakhamari, or Gorakhamandi, in Kathiawar, Gujarat; Gorakha temple at Dhinodhar hill, near Bhuj, Gujarat; Gorakhadanda near Mangalore, Karnataka; Gorakha-tilla, also called Tilla Jogian, a hillock in west Punjab, Pakistan; Gorakha Dibbi in the precincts of Jwalaji shrine, Himachal Pradesh; Gorakhatari in Peshawar, Pakistan; and many centres of worship in Nepal, among which are Bogamati, Mrigasthali, Sawari Kot, Pidadhan, Bhat Gaon, and Caughara. The valiant Gurkha community of Nepal proudly derive their spiritual lineage from Guru Gorakhanatha. Of the five main peaks of mount Girnar, the highest (3,666 ft) is named after Gorakhanatha. The other four peaks—Ambaji, Oghad, Dattatreya (Datta), and Kalika—are associated with Shaiva or Shiva-Shakti schools. Some Natha teachers are said to have been endowed with divine powers by Dattatreya—called the Adi Guru, primal spiritual guide—or by mother goddesses, who are the matrix of the universe. It is believed that the preceptors of the Natha sect reveal their cos-

mic presence in Girnar during Lili Parikrama, the five-day annual circumambulatory fair held from the 11th to the 15th of the bright half of Kartika (October–November).¹⁵

Among the major works attributed to Gorakhanatha are *Siddha-siddhāntapadyati*, 'Method and Principles of Adepts', and *Goraksha-shataka*, 'Hundred Verses of Gorakha'. Several other texts known after him in Sanskrit, Hindi, and Punjabi are: *Gorakha-gita*, 'Gospel of Gorakha', *Goraksha Samhita*, 'Collection of Gorakha', *Jnanamrita*, 'Nectar of Knowledge', *Yoga-martanda*, 'Sun of Yoga', *Yoga-bija*, 'Seed of Yoga', *Gorakhabani*, 'The Word of Gorakha', and *Gorakha-bodha*, 'Realization of Gorakha'. *Gorakṣāsana*, the yogic posture which is a panacea for all diseases,¹⁶ is named after him. So are medicinal herbs like gorakha-mundi (*Sphaeranthus indicus*) and gorakha-pana (*Heliotropium strigosum*), which he discovered for healing wounds, eye disorders, and piles; or the gorakha-cinca tree (*Baobab*, *Amla*, *Imali*, *Tamarindus indica*), under whose shade he used to meditate and teach.

(To be concluded)

Notes and References

1. Swami Pratyagatmananda, 'Philosophy of the Tantras', in *Studies on the Tantras* (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2002), 21; S C Banerji, *A Brief History of Tantra Literature* (Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1988), 26. On the basis of old and middle Bengali literature Sukumar Sen argues that the Baul cult of Bengal is 'a transformed form of the Nātha Cult'. He affirms that the Bauls have adopted the yogic discipline of the Nathas as also their mystical poetry and way of 'talking in riddles'—see Sukumar Sen, 'The Nātha Cult', in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, 4: *The Religions*, ed. Haridas Bhattacharya (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1957), 280.

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