
Guru Nanak and The Jogis Tradition: A Historical Context

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ABSTRACT: *Guru Nanak's attitude to contemporary religion is informed by ideas and values which induce him not to identify himself with any of the existing forms of established religion. Infact, he applies those ideas consistently to evaluate all contemporary belief and practice. The closest he comes to an explicit appreciation for any kind of individuals, it is for the sadhs and sants.¹ Guru Nanak came in the line of the great saints, who emphasized only personal experience of the Divine is what the philosopher calls "mystic experience" as the core of true religion.² There are many references to siddhas, yogins (jogis), nathas and avadhutas, not only in the Japu and the Sidh-gosthi but also in many other hymns and devotional songs by Guru Nanak and preserved in Guru Granth Sahib, said to have been compiled in 1604A.D.³ Guru Nanak's encounters with jogis have remained a favourite theme of Sikh literature for nearly four centuries. This tradition was well established in the time of Bhai Gurdas in whose Vars we have one of the earliest interpretations of Guru Nanak's attitude towards the jogis.⁴ The present paper seeks to highlights the Guru Nanak ideas associated with the siddhas, yogi and nathas of medieval India.*

KEYWORDS: Guru Nanak, the jogis tradition, historical context

INTRODUCTION

The word *siddha* has been translated as 'accomplished', 'fulfilled', 'successful', 'one who has obtained his object' etc. Usually religious personages of great learning, purity and unusual skill are called *siddhas*. In Puranic mythology they are semi-divine beings who along with *munis* (the silent ones) live in the earth and heaven, called Bhuvarloka. Any inspired sage or seer (*rishi*) is often called a *siddha*. Technically speaking a holy person, a monk, a sage, or an ascetic (*yogin, jogi, bhikshu, tapasa, muni, yati, shramana,*) all these are translatable generally as 'ascetic'.⁵ In early medieval India, from the seventh century onwards, *siddhas* became popular teachers of a special type of esoteric *yoga*. By virtue of their skill and success in this *yoga* they were called

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siddhas. They were also called *yogins* (or *jogis*) because they were the masters and teachers, not of the classical ascetic *yoga* (*tapas*, austerly) and meditation of the type of early Jaina, Buddhist, Samkhya and Yoga (of Upanishads and Yogasutra), but of *mantra-yoga*, *guhya-yoga* and *hatha-yoga*. All those who obtained success (*siddhi*) in these practical techniques of communion or union (*yoga*) were called *siddhas*.⁶

The text of the *Nathas* sect prove that the *siddhas* are called *yogins* as well as *nathas*. There is no important reasons for making a difference and distinction between the words *siddhas*, *yogin*, *avadhuta* and *natha* in the context of medieval devotional mysticism. The differences are to be found in certain aspects of the doctrines and practices of the different group of *siddhas*, *yogins* and *nathas*, and these differences are due to the differences between the religious system to which they belonged, i.e., Buddhism, Shaivism, Shaktism, Vasihnnavism, Pantanjala yoga and Hathiyoga. The *yogins* of the mixed tradition of Hathiyoga and Shaivism are called *siddhas*, *avadhutas* as well as *nathas*. Then, there may have been some independent *yogins* or *siddhas* who were neither Buddhist nor Braminical but were lords (*nathas*) in their own right. In the same way, there were some devotees (*bhaktas*) who were called *yogins* because they sought union (*yoga*) with God; they were also called *nathas* because they begged for or asked for the favour (*prasada*) of God. However, in recent times it has become customary to take the word *natha* in the sense a follower of Gorakshanatha.⁷

In the *bani* of Guru Nanak there are several passages which easily could and did serve as the basis of the later tradition. It has been noted, for instance, that in the *bani* of Guru Nanak there is frequent use of the terminology of the *jogis*. It has been suggested that Guru Nanak was deeply influenced by them.⁸ It has been argued that the *hath-yoga* of the *Nath jogis* had come to form an integral part of the synthesis evolved by the *sants* of northern India by the time of Guru Nanak who was much indebted to this *Sant* tradition.⁹ However, Guru Nanak's attitude towards the contemporary beliefs and practices of the *jogis* has not received the attention it deserves. The premier *jogi* establishment in the Punjab was the *Tilla* of Gorakh Nath, and nearly all *jogi* establishments were connected with it. These establishments were not the only monastic orders in the country but they were perhaps the best organized.

There were in fact several sects of *Nath yogis*. They are regarded as a single *panth* because they share a common allegiance to Gorakhnath, a common adherence to the *hatha-yoga* technique, and the common observance of a particular custom. The *jogis* of the Gorakh Nath order presented a striking appearance. Those who went through the last stage of initiation had their ear-lobes pierced for large rings (*mundras*). They generally used the epithet *nath* with their names and were commonly called *kanpatas* ('split-ear')¹⁰ This is the practice of wearing large ear-rings (*mudra*), a custom which has earned them the name of *kanphat yogis*.¹¹ The antecedents of the *Kanphat yogis* can be traced to the ancient tradition of esoteric Tantrism. They smeared their bodies with ash, wore a lion-cloth and used a particular kind of cloak. They generally carried with them a staff,

a begging bowl and the blowing horn called *singi* or *nad*. Some of them stayed in cremation grounds. At their centres fire was kept constantly burning (*dhuni*). In their religious practices, the *jogis* attached great importance to preliminary purifications and depended on meditation and techniques of *abhyas* and *pranyama* for attaining to the state of supreme bliss which for them was the ultimate goal.¹²

Turning to the *bani* of Guru Nanak, we observe his thorough familiarity with the beliefs and practices of *jogis*, a familiarity which could be the result by of personal observation and of the contact with some of the representatives of Gorakh Nathis. Far from being a token of appreciation, Guru Nanak's preoccupation with the *jogis* is a proof of his differences with them. For Nanak, the primary objective is to realize the divine presence within oneself by purifying the mind and restraining sensual desires. Similarly, the true begging bowl is the effort to earn honour with God, and the true reward is the gift of the Name (*nam*). True meditation means being really detached. The true *mundra* is the *shabad* of the Guru and the true cloak is forgiveness; the true jog is to accept the will of God. Notwithstanding the use of *jogi* terminology in many a verse, what is being expressed in them is the truth as it was conceived by Guru Nanak. The divinity within man is revealed by the Guru and man recognizes God in a state of supreme bliss.¹³

The *Naths* of Nanak's day and of the period following belonged to the different lineage. It is impossible to trace the line of development with any clarity, but both the tantric origins and the radical distinction from the Sants are clear. The *Naths* Masters are commonly called Siddh acharyas of the Buddhiat Sahajiya cult.¹⁴ *Nath yogis* is a feature of medieval Indian society which has received only a fragment of the attention which it deserves. This neglected derives partly from the condition of the sect when first it became an object of interest to European observers. Monserrate, who accompanied Akbar on a visit to the Nath centre at *Tilla*, indicates the kind of impression which the sect made upon an observer during the late 15th century.¹⁵ Some memoirs by travelers such as those by the Italian traveler Varthema refer to the Nath Yogi people they met, phonetically as *Ioghes*.¹⁶

By the 16th century the various Nath sects had achieved a considerable diffusion over Northern India, with two major centres in the Panjab and Nepal. With this Nath continued into the janam-sakhi period and discussed with interaction of Gorakhnath and Guru Nanak. It is Gorakhnath who indicates a choice of succession to Baba Nanak and in the Mahima Parkash tradition it is he who first recognize Nanak's greatness. In this respect the actual origin of this particular discourse is a series of shaloks by Guru Nanak which refer to several of the Nath Masters by name.

Before the 18th century they were called *Jogi* or *Yogi*. However, during the colonial rule, the term "*Yogi/Jogi*" was used with derision and classified by British India census as a "low status caste". In the 20th century, the community began to use the alternate term *Nath* instead in their public relations, while continuing to use their historical term of "*yogi or jogi*" to refer to each other within

the community. The term *Nath or Natha*, with the meaning of lord, is a term also found in Vaishnavism (e.g. Gopinath, Jagannath) and in Jainism (Adinatha, Parsvanatha). The term *yogi* or *jogi* is not limited to *Natha* subtradition, and has been widely used in Indian culture for anyone who is routinely devoted to *yoga*.

On the whole Guru Nanak's differences with the *jogis* were fundamental, in matters both of belief and of practice. His conception of loving devotion to God as the best form of worship was opposed to the use of psycho-physical techniques of the *jogis*. Rejecting the idea of God's grace they appeared to be rather presumptuous in their advocacy of self effort as the sufficient means of liberation. Guru Nanak's ideal of social commitment clashed with the *jogi* ideal of renunciation. Consequently, he had much, but nothing commendable, to say about the followers of Gorakh Nath. Guru Nanak's denunciation of the *jogis* was in fact a part of his rejection of all ascetic traditions of India which placed renunciation at the centre.¹⁷

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