Ramānandī Tyāgīs and Haṭhayoga

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The Vaiṣṇava Ramānandīs are probably the largest renunciate sect in North India.¹ The biggest subsection of the Ramānandīs is that of the Tyāgīs, “Renouncers”, who make up the majority of the sect. Although avowedly Vaiṣṇava, Tyāgīs have much in common with other non-Vaiṣṇava modern Indian ascetic orders, in particular the Śaiva Dasnāmī Nāgās, the Nāths and the Udāsī Nāgās. To the layperson there is little to tell these orders apart. They wear their hair long, in jaṭā, and clothe themselves in laṅgolīs, loincloths, and little else. They are celibate and abandon all familial relationships. They are predominantly peripatetic and follow an annual round of pilgrimages and festivals. They live around dhūmis, perpetually smouldering fires, and are fond of smoking gaṇjā and caras. They undergo acts of self-mortification in order to attain spiritual power and they frame their spiritual journeys in the language of haṭhayoga.²

The origins of the individual elements shared by these orders are many and complex. We can trace some back to the Vedic era and the epics,³ some to early

²These shared attributes also serve to differentiate between the orders. At initiation, for example, the Dasnāmīs and Nāths are given single rudrākṣa seeds to wear around their necks, but Tyāgīs wear pieces of tulasi wood (often of such a size and carved in such a way that they resemble rudrākṣa seeds) and Udāsīs wear another similarly sized bead, called a nazar batū. Udāsīs make their jaṭā especially thick and wear them coiled around their heads, Dasnāmīs generally wear theirs in a bun tied on top or at the sides of the head and Tyāgīs wear theirs at the back of the head. Tyāgīs wear white cloth and deride the ochre robes of the other orders as having the colour of Pārvatī’s menstrual fluid.
³E.g. the mention of long hair and poison (i.e. intoxicants) in Rgveda 10.136 and the more explicit descriptions of ascetics wearing jaṭā and undergoing austerities (tapas) found throughout the epics.
Saivism, some to tantric Saivism, some to the Nãths, some to the Sãfis, some to the Sants and some to the tradition of antinomian asceticism characterised as that of the avadhûta.

Monastic orders rise and fall and this is reflected in the relative prosperity of today’s three main orders. The Nãths flourished from approximately the fourteenth century onwards but are now a shadow of their former selves. Eliade (1969:302) describes them as showing “all the signs of a sect in decomposition”. They were gradually superseded by the Dasnãmis, who achieved prominence after copying the organisational structure of the Sãfi institutions that had come to power in large parts of India (Clark 2004). Meanwhile, in the eighteenth century, the Rãmãndãs began to expand their territory from Rajasthan and establish monasteries in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and the Nepalese Terai (Van der Veer 1989:142). As stated above, they are now probably the largest ascetic order in North India.

4E.g. the wearing of ashes as described in Pãşyaptasûtra 1.2.

5Tyãgis explain their appearance as an imitation of that of Rãma when he lived in the forest as an ascetic; the other orders imitate Ñiva. One of the earliest references to imitating one’s tutelary deity as part of one’s sãdhana is found in the Picumata or Brahmâyãmalatantra (National Archives Kathmandu MS No. 3-370, f.326r to f.327v). I am grateful to Professor Alexis Sanderson for providing me with this reference.

6The Nãths are the oldest of the four orders and are the originators of hathayoga which is practised to some degree by all the orders.

7The use of cannabis for spiritual intoxication was introduced to India by wandering Sãffi ascetics in around 1400CE (Sanderson 2003: n.43). I suspect that the exalted position of the dhûni and the associated use of cintã, fire-tongs, were also a Sãffi innovation but more research is needed to confirm this. In the dharmasãstras, ascetics are forbidden from using fire (e.g. Mãnavadharmaśâstra 6.43) and no Sanskrit texts from before the advent of Islam in India mention fire-tongs among ascetic accoutrements. It seems likely that a non-Brahmanic ascetic tradition of using fire was combined with the Sãfis’ use of fires and fire-tongs to give the dhûni the importance it now has.

8The nirguna bhakti movement propounded by the Sants spread across North India between the 15th and 17th centuries and had a profound effect on asceticism. All four orders worship the divine as without attributes (nirguna) in the manner of the Sants. They advocate bhakti and the repetition of the name of God as the best, and sometimes the only, means of liberation. Gorakhñãth, Udãsis and Dasnãmis are much given to the shouting of alakh (Sanskrit alaksya), “imperceptible”, a word often used to describe the divine in nirguna poetry. The Siddhãt Patal, a Tyãgi ritual handbook in Hindi, is full of nirguna terms. In its opening verse the divine is described as the alakh purus. Tyãgis do not worship anthropomorphic images of Rãma but use ñalagrámas, black ammonite stones from the Ganãdaki river in Nepal. Dasnãmis worship narmadešvaras, polished stones from the bed of the river Narmada.

9Avadhûta (“shaken off”) denotes an ascetic who has cast off worldly cares. All four orders refer to themselves as avadhûtas and worship Dattãtreya, the archetypal avadhûta.

10I do not include the Udãsis here because until recently they have been confined to north-west India, in particular the Punjab. They are now in the ascendant and are spreading throughout north India.
The control of individual temples illustrates these shifts in power. The shrine of Eklingji, the tutelary deity of the Maharanas of Udaipur, was originally in the hands of Pashupatas. Inscriptions show that it then fell under the control of the Nath before being taken over by the Dasnami (Tamres n.d.). The Nath centre at Galta was taken over by the Ramnandis in the 16th century (Clementin-Ojha 1999:28, Burghart 1978:127). The temple of Hanuman Garihi in Ayodhya is said to have been a site of worship for Nathas and Muslim fakirs until it was taken over by the Dasnami. Then, in the eighteenth century the Dasnami were driven out by a Ramnandi called Abhayram Das (van der Veer 1989:150).

As each order has come to prominence, it has not sought to overhaul older traditions but has adopted and adapted them for itself. Thus, over time, a model of an idealised archetypal ascetic has evolved, his lifestyle the refinement of millennia of practice, his iconography drawn from a wide array of sources. This notion of an archetypal ascetic is present, with regional variations, in the minds of the Indian laity and, other factors such as charisma notwithstanding, the amount of patronage attracted by an ascetic is in proportion to how well he lives up to this ideal.

The archetypal ascetic is a master of yoga, in particular the hathayoga often said to have first been taught by Gorakhnath, the third guru of the Naths after Adinath and Matsyendranath. However, dedicated practice of hathayoga is in fact rare among ascetics of all orders. On this point van der Veer remarks about the Tyagis (1989:121–122):

"...there is an extensive primary and secondary literature on yog which suggests that it is one of the most important aspects of an ascetic life-style, while during my fieldwork I found only fragmentary traces of knowledge about it among the tyagis. Although almost all tyagis, when asked, answered that they performed yogic exercises, only very few of them were actually able to show more than a few positions. Contrary to expectation therefore, yog does not seem to play an important role in the life-style of the tyagis."

Similarly, in his many detailed ethnographic papers on the Tyagis, Burghart makes no mention of yoga. For most Tyagis, tapas, asceticism, is more important than yoga. The austerity most widely practised by the Ramnandis is dhuni-tap, in which the ascetic sits surrounded by smouldering cow-dung fires under the

\[11\] In approximately 1975, control of the shrine was given to local Brahmins.

\[12\] The Naths’ rise in influence was in no small part due to their mastery of hathayoga. Other orders found it necessary to appropriate its techniques in order to compete with them for patronage. Thus, for example, passages from Nath texts on hathayoga were used to compile new works in order to make up the corpus of 108 upanisads which were commented on by the Advaita Vedantin Upninsadbrahmayogin (Bouy 1994).
midday summer sun. At the end of the practice many Tyāgīs will perform a few hathayogic āsanas, and this is usually the extent of their practice of yoga.

Unlike van der Veer and Burghart, my fieldwork among the Rāmaṇandīs has been devoted to finding practitioners of yoga and in particular the yogic practice called khecarīmudrā. I concur with van der Veer’s general point that yoga “does not seem to play an important role in the life-style of the tyagis” but there are individuals among them who, by any yardstick, are masters of haṭhayoga.\(^{13}\)

Rāmaṇandī Practitioners of haṭhayoga

At the 1992 Ujjain Kumbh Melā, I was sitting at the dhūmi of a Tyāgī mahant when he pointed out another Tyāgī walking by. He turned to a woman at the dhūmi and said, “Beware of that bābā. If he gets inside you he will suck out all your sākta!”

The bābā was Śrī Rām Bālak Dās Yogyārāj, a mahant of the Terah Bhāī Tyāgī suborder of the Rāmaṇandī Tyāgīs. Bālak Dās was born into a Rājpūt family in a village near Gorakhpur, on the border between Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. At the age of about ten he ran away from home and made his way to Varanasi, where he hoped to become a musician. While there, he met Śrī Prahlād Dās Yogirāj, a Tyāgī srimahant who was a celā of the famous Devrāhā Bābā. Prahlād Dās had mastered the practices of yoga as taught to him by Devrāhā Bābā. Besides the well-known yogic practices of āsana and prāṇāyāma, he knew and practised more obscure techniques such as khecarīmudrā,\(^{14}\) vajrolīmudrā,\(^{15}\) and kāyakalpa.\(^{16}\)

\(^{13}\)The same can be said of the other ascetic orders. One might think that the Nāths, as heirs to the original tradition of haṭhayoga, would have more accomplished yogins among their number, but in fact there are even fewer among them than in the other orders. When I asked some senior Nāth mahants at the 1998 Hardwar Kumbh Mela if they knew of any members of their order who practised khecarīmudrā they replied that sadly most Nāths are nowadays interested only in getting intoxicated. I did hear reports of one Nāth, Sampat Nāth of Ajmer, who had mastered khecarīmudrā, but I did not meet him.

\(^{14}\)Khecarīmudrā is described in detail in the Khecarīvidyā and explained in my introduction and annotation to the text and translation. It involves freeing and lengthening the tongue so that it can be turned back and inserted into the cavity above the soft palate in order to drink anumāṭa, the nectar of immortality.

\(^{15}\)Vajrolīmudrā is the practice of sucking liquids through the urethra. It is described briefly in various early Sanskrit manuals on haṭhayoga (e.g. Hathapradipikā 3.82–89, Śivasamhitā 4.78–104 and Dattātreya yogasāstra 299–314) and in more detail in the later Hatharatnāvali (2.80–112) and Brhatkhecarīprakāśa (f. 103r\(^{11}\)–f. 104r\(^{a}\)). Darmon (2002) gives an ethnographic account of vajrolīmudrā as carried out by Śākta yogins at Tārāpīṭh in Bengal.

\(^{16}\)To undergo kāyakalpa, the yogin stays in a dark room or cave for an extended period (usually one lunar month) eating a single herbal preparation in order to rejuvenate his body. Herbal preparations for kāyakalpa are described in the fourth paṭala of the Khecarīvidyā and in the Kācācaṇḍīśivarakalpatantra. A modern account of the practice is given in Anantha Murthy
Donations from Prahlâd Dâs’s lay devotees had enabled him to establish ashrams in Varanasi, Jaipur, Gwalior and Ayodhya, and a farm in Bihar. He travelled between them as the leader of a jamât, an itinerant monastery.

Prahlâd Dâs initiated Râm Bâlak Dâs as his celâ and after a few years started to teach him yoga. He soon mastered āsana and prānâyâma, and Prahlâd Dâs decided to teach him more advanced practices including basti, a method of auto-enema in which the yogin uses a technique called nauli to create a vacuum in the stomach and draw water into the intestines. He was then taught vajrōmudrā. By inserting specially made golden probes of steadily increasing length and diameter into Bâlak Dâs’s urethra, Prahlâd Dâs opened it up and removed a piece of gristle (Hindi mâns in Bâlak Dâs’s words) at its top end. This piece of gristle, said Bâlak Dâs, acts as a valve, so by using nauli, Bâlak Dâs was then able to suck fluids up his urethra into his bladder.

At Bâlak Dâs’s suggestion, I went to Delhi to meet Śrî Nainâ Dâs Jî Yogîrâj, an elderly and well respected Râmânandi Nâgâ who had been an accomplished hathayogin when he was younger. He too had mastered vajrōmudrā, as well as khecarîmudrā. He was reluctant to talk to me about how and why he had learnt these practices and would only say that they had to be experienced to be understood.

At the Dussehra festival in Kullu in 1996 I was introduced to Śrî Paraśurâm Dâs Jî Yogîrâj, an itinerant Tyâgî mahânt, and told that he was an accomplished hathayogin. One evening I asked him about khecarîmudrā. He replied that such practices were not suitable for a sâdhârân vyakti, an “ordinary individual”. That night we waited for the autumn full moon to reach its zenith before eating platefuls of khûr, rice pudding, into which the moon had poured amrta, the nectar of immortality. The next morning Bâlak Dâs told me to look at Paraśurâm Dâs. His mouth was wide open and he was demonstrating khecarîmudrâ. He then deigned to discuss it with me. It is samâdhi kâ aûg, a constituent part of samâdhi. He had learnt it here and there from other sâdhus, not from one guru. It enabled him to drink amrta and thereby go without food for two to three days at a time.

When Paraśurâm Dâs said that khecarîmudrâ was a part of samâdhi he did not mean the eighth aûga of Patañjali’s aṣṭânga yoga, but the celebrated yogic practice of remaining in meditation for long periods of time, usually underground. Because it suppresses hunger and thirst, khecarîmudrâ is often said to be an important part of this technique.18 During my fieldwork, I have heard rumours of Tyâgis who are

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17 On nauli see e.g. Haṭhapradîpikâ 2.34–35.
18 See Br.hatkhecarîprakâsa f. 72v. Many of the historical reports of bhûmi-gat samâdhi mention the yogin’s use of khecarîmudrâ: Honigberger (1852:129) and Sir Claude Wade (Braid 1850:13) describe it in the case of the Râmânandi Hari Dâs; cf. Boileau (1837:41–44) and the seventeenth century account of Tavernier (1925:156).
planning to perform this samādhi but I have never witnessed it.\textsuperscript{19} In 2004 a young 
Tyāgī of my acquaintance called Narsimh Dās undertook a related austerity of 
which I hadn’t heard before. He covered his chest with earth in which he had 
put chickpeas and remained lying down for a week until the seeds sprouted. He 
had started to learn khecarīmudrā when he undertook this austerity and used it 
throughout.

At an ashram near Surat, I met Śrī Govind Dās Ji Yogirāj, a Rāmānandī 
mahānt of the Mahātyāgī suborder who had also mastered khecarīmudrā but had 
not practised it for some years. He demonstrated it to me with some difficulty. He 
told me that he had used it to drink amṛta. At first the liquid he tasted was fishy, 
then salty, then like butter, then like ghee and finally it had a taste jīskā varṇan 
kiyā nahīṃ jāyegā, “which cannot be described”.

In Rishikesh I met Śrī Bālyogī Lāl Ji Bhāi. He had learnt khecarīmudrā from 
his guru, a Tyāgī from Nepal. Drinking amṛta had a naśā, “intoxication”, like 
whisky and if he didn’t do it every day he felt out of sorts. It made him immortal 
and gave him the power of flight.

At the 1998 Hardwar Kumbh Melā, Śrī Raghuvār Dās Ji Yogirāj, a gurubhāī 
of Bālak Dās whom I had known for six years, surprised me by demonstrating 
khecarīmudrā. He told me that it had two varieties: the hathayogic practice and 
an implicitly superior rājyoga variety, which was purely mental.\textsuperscript{20} Raghuvār Dās 
then told me that he was able to induce samādhi in me. Without waiting for my 
assent he squeezed both sides of my neck. I backed away as I started to feel faint.\textsuperscript{21}

Bālak Dās told me that his guru, Prahlād Dās, had practised kāyakalpa on 
more than one occasion. He would usually eat nothing but a preparation of āmālā 
(*Phyllanthus emblica* LINN.) and spend a month in a cave or a room constructed 
especially for the purpose, attended to by his disciples. When he emerged, he 
would appear years younger. In 1998 I visited a Tyāgī ashram at Nangal Dam on 
the banks of the Sutlej where I was shown a room built into the bank of the river 
in which many yogins were said to have performed kāyakalpa.

It is thus clear that the practice of hathayoga among the Rāmānandīs, although 
undeniably rare, is still current. It would seem to be in decline. This was the 
opinion of my informants, although the prevailing ideology of kaliyug may have

\textsuperscript{19}At the last few Kumbh Melās this type of samādhi has been performed in an open pit for 
periods of up to a week by a yogin called Pilot Bābā of no apparent sectarian affiliation, together 
with a female Japanese disciple.

\textsuperscript{20}This reflects the two khecarīmudrās described in the *Haṭhapradīpikā* (3.31–53 and 4.42–55).

\textsuperscript{21}This practice is part of yogic lore. Ballāla, in the *Bṛhatkhecaripraṇāsā*, his c. 1700 CE 
commentary on the *Khecarīvidyā*, lists various ways of bringing about samādhi, and says that 
some people “use a special massage of an internal channel that they have discovered after lots 
of practice to enter samādhi and cause others to enter it” (f. 72v*: anve bahvabhyyāsenā jñātā-
bhyaṁtaṁāntaranādiviśasamardanaṁ taṁ kurvaṁti kārayaṁti ca*).
influenced their assessments. Almost all of my informant’s said that their knowledge and mastery of yoga were but a fraction of their guru’s, but again this is typical of hagiology. However, few of the yogins I met had found disciples willing or able to learn hathayoga from them. Furthermore, in the many Rāmānandī ashrams that I have visited, I have found no evidence of the building of new facilities for the practice of hathayoga. At his ashram near Pimpalgāṃv in the Nāsik district of Maharashṭra, Bālak Dās had constructed a room equipped for the performance of yogic kriyās such as basti and vajroli mudrā for which privacy and a good supply of water are necessary, but it had fallen into disuse.

I have found only one example of anecdotal evidence of the practice of hathayoga by Rāmānandīs in the past. Of the several cases of bhūmigat, “underground”, samādhi which have been documented, perhaps the most famous was that of the Rāmānandī Hari Dās who was buried for forty days in a locked chest in a garden in Lahore in 1837.22 Despite the paucity of historical reports of Rāmānandīs practising hathayoga, evidence that they were practising it at the beginning of the eighteenth century can be found in the Jogpradīpakā of Jayatarāma.

Jayatarāma’s Jogpradīpakā

Jayatarāma was a spiritual descendant of Kṛṣṇa Dās Payahārī, the first mahant of the important Rāmānandī seat at Galta, near Jaipur.23 He composed the Jogpradīpakā in Vrindavan in 1718 ce.24 It is a manual of hathayoga written in 964 Braj Bhāṣā verses, using dohā, sorthā and caupāī metres. Jayatarāma drew extensively from various Sanskrit works on hathayoga to compose the text,25 in particular the long recension of the Haṭhayaprādīpikā.26 The late Manohar Gharote edited the text from two manuscripts, one from Pune and one from Varanasi.

The text teaches all of the usual practices of hathayoga together with some more unusual ones. Thus, within the framework of the eight aṅgas of Patañjali’s

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23Payahārī means “one who lives off milk”. On p. 1 of his introduction to the Jogpradīpakā, Gharote asserts that Payahārī Bābā was Jayatarāma’s guru. This is hard to reconcile with Clémentin-Ojha’s assertion that Payahārī Bābā took control of Galta at the beginning of the 16th century ce (1999:28). Payahārī’s renown as the liberator of Galta from the Nāths lives on among Rāmānandīs today.
24Jayatarāma gives the date and place of composition of the text in vv. 960–961.
25Jayatarāma lists the eleven works he used to compose the Jogpradīpakā in vv. 955–957: pātañjal yog prakās, citdāna, jognidh, jogprakās, jogsamghitā, jogsamgh, mūratsamghitā, haṭhayaprādīpikā, gorakhsat, tatpradīpakā and jognāgavali.
26There are several different recensions of the Haṭhayaprādīpikā. The longest is that found in MS No. 6756 in the collection of the Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, Jodhpur. It consists of 1553 verses in contrast with the 409 found in the Lonavla critical edition.
āṣṭāṅga yoga, we hear of ten yamas, ten niyamas, eighty-four āsanas, six cleansing practices (satākarmas), eight types of breath-retention (kumbhaka or prāṇāyāma), twenty-four mudrās, onkāra, pratyāhāra, dhāraṇās of the five elements, kālaṇjāna (how to predict one’s time of death), kālavaṅcana (how to cheat death when it arrives), dhyāna, parakāyapravesāna (how to enter another’s body), the balancing of vāyu by drinking rice and lentil gruel (javāgu), descriptions of the ten nādiś and ten vāyus, supplementary cleansing techniques, an extended description of khecarimudrā, descriptions of the six cakras and instructions on samādhi.27

Unlike other manuals of haṭhyaoga, the chief deities of the Jogpradīpākā are Sītā and Rāma (Hindi Siyā and Rām, often written as the compound Siyārām), the tutelary deities of the Rāmānandīs. Thus the dhyāna taught at vv. 780–796 consists of instructions for the yogin to visualise an eight-petalled lotus in the heart within which are the sun and the moon. Within them are fires in which the yogin is to visualise Rām and Siyā shining forth. Similarly, in v. 527 in the description of the ākāraśī mudrā, the yogin is told to sit in svastikāsana, meditate on piṇḍabrahma, use prāṇāyāma to move prāṇa to the tenth door (the opening at the top of the skull) and visualise Sīyārām inside the thousand-petalled lotus.28

A corollary of Siyārām’s primacy in the Jogpradīpākā is that, other than in verse 5 of the preliminary benediction, Śiva, who is credited with being the original teacher of haṭhyaoga in all its other manuals, is not mentioned.29 The Jogpradīpākā was composed at a time of fierce rivalry between the Rāmānandīs and the Śaiva Daśnāmī Saṃnyāsīs,30 and this may be the reason for the omission. Rāmānandīs today are happy to acknowledge Śiva as the propounder of haṭhyaoga.

27 Several of the practices described are not found in Sanskrit manuals of haṭhyaoga and Jayatarāma also gives new names to established practices. Thus vajrolimudrā is called vīraja, bijarīpāṇi and vīra mudrā at vv. 552–561 (it is also referred to in passing as vajrolimudrā in v. 560). Similarly, amaroli mudrā (see Haṭhapradīpikā 3.93–94) is given the alternative name varaṇaka mudrā in vv. 677–683. Some of the practices taught in the Jogpradīpākā which are not taught elsewhere are very bizarre. In vv. 834–843 Jayatarāma describes some supplementary cleansing techniques necessary for samādhi. These include, at vv. 838–841, instructions to draw in water through the anus and expel it through the penis and vice-versa, and then to do the same with air instead of water. This is, of course, anatomically impossible.

28 Siyā and Rām are also said to be at the [lotus with] countless petals in v. 934.

29 Although Jayatarāma conspicuously avoids praise of Śiva, he usually preserves the Śaiva names of the practices he describes. Thus we hear of bhairū āsana (vv.95–100), kapāli āsana (vv.115–117), siva āsana (118–121), aghora āsana (vv. 205–209), rudra āsana (vv. 227–230), sivalinga āsana (vv. 233–234). Similarly, other practices have names which clearly originate in the Nāth tradition: gorakṣī āsana (vv. 85–87), mahaṇḍra āsana (vv. 91–94), bhadrarogaka āsana (vv. 131–133), and the carpaṭcok, gvalipāv, kanoeripāv, hālipāv, mūḍakipāv, jalaṇḍhāripāv, gopīcarṇḍ and bharthari āsanas described at vv. 254–275, which are all named after Nāth Siddhas.

30 See e.g. Clémentin-Ojha 1999.
Jayatarāma has not, however, completely excluded references to Kaula tantric practices from his text. At v. 638 we hear that applying khecarīmudrā will prevent the yogin’s bindu from falling when he is in the embrace of a woman. The description of the bijarūpāni mudrā (another name for vajrolīmudrā) at vv. 552–561 is more explicit and explains how the yogin is to resorb through his urethra the combined sexual fluids of him and a young woman in order to unite Śiva and Śakti within his body. This, he says, is rājayoga, adding the caveat that it is to be done indoors (v. 559).

**Paradoxes of Rāmānandī haṭhayoga**

The corpus of haṭhayogic texts is not a doctrinally coherent whole. The origins of haṭhayoga are closely linked to the beginnings of the Nāth sampradāya and can be seen as a similar attempt to bring together various different schools, ranging from orders of relatively orthodox celibate ascetics, through to alchemists and antinomian tantrics. The Rāmānandī Tyāgīs are natural heirs to the ascetic tradition of yoga, but the haṭhayoga that they inherited already included elements from several different yogic traditions.

Many of the techniques of haṭhayoga have their origins in practices taught in Śaiva tantras. Indeed, most of haṭhayoga can be seen as an interiorisation of Śaiva tantric ritual, in which the need for its external elements, including Kaula features such as alcohol, meat and a sexual partner, is removed. However, traces of Kaulism are still to be found. These, and its Śaiva heritage, make for some doctrinal paradoxes in the practice of haṭhayoga by Rāmānandī Tyāgīs, who are celibate Vaiṣṇava renunciates.

Haṭhayoga is so well accepted as part of orthodox ascetic religious practice that

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31 Cf. Ṣṭhapradipīkā 3.41.
32 Contrast this with the Gheranāsāṁhitā, a manual of haṭhayoga which has Vaiṣṇava leanings but does recognise Śiva as haṭhayoga’s original teacher. At 3.39 it includes a vajrolīmudrā in its description of twenty-five mudrās which is completely different from that found in all other texts on haṭhayoga, being no more than a simple āsana.
33 In a simplification of the complex situation which is revealed in the many texts of haṭhayoga, the c. 14th century Śāṅgadharapaddhatī (4365a–4371b) says that there are two different methods of its practice. One represents the tradition of the celibate ascetic: the yogin pierces the three knots and leads his breath and his mind upwards to his head. The other has roots in the tantric tradition: the yogin is to pierce the five cakras and lead Kuṇḍalinī to the store of amṛta in the skull before flooding the body with it. The different approaches to the practice of haṭhayoga described in its texts are discussed in my introduction to the Khecarīvidyā.
34 The best textual witness of this tradition is the Dattātreyayogāśāstra, an early haṭhayogic manual relatively free of tantric elements.
35 On this interiorisation of tantric ritual, see the chapter on khecarīmudrā in my introduction to the Khecarīvidyā.
its tantric roots have for the most part been long forgotten. Thus Tyāgīs, who would never let themselves be called tāntrikas, are happy to discuss the raising of Kuṇḍalini through the cakras, and the attainment of siddhis such as the power of flight and the ability to drink amṛta, all of whose origins can be traced in tantric texts.

However, some of hathayoga’s Śaiva tantric heritage does pose problems for the Tyāgīs. The most obvious example of this is vajroli-mudrā, the practice described above which was originally used after ritual sexual intercourse to resorb the combined sexual fluids of the male and female partners. This was apparently acceptable to Jayatarāma but is completely beyond the pale of today’s Rāmānandī Tyāgī, who has taken on the mantle of the defender of modern Hinduism and its new puritanism.36 Tyāgīs are also known as Vairāgīs, “those without passion”. They are wholeheartedly celibate and women are effectively excluded from the order. They see themselves as ultra-orthodox Hindus. In contrast with other ascetic orders, they keep their topknots at initiation and preserve the right to perform Vedic sacrifices. They are steadfastly vegetarian, and do not use onion and garlic. Vajroli-mudrā’s unorthodox “left-hand” tantric origins are obvious. Writing about its practice at Tārāpīṭḥ in Bengal, Darmon says that “seul un nombre infime de yogis parmi les vāmācāris effectue les opérations de ce type” (2002:214). So how can a Rāmānandī Tyāgī justify the practice of vajroli-mudrā?

Tyāgīs stand out from other renunciate orders in their fastidious observance of purity rules. At a Himalayan tīrtha it is the Tyāgīs and not the other sādhus who will rise at dawn and bathe in icy water. Rāmānandī ritual handbooks such as the Siddhānt Paṭal and Rām Paṭal contain detailed instructions on every aspect of physical purity. The cleansing practices of hathayoga take this to its extremes and thus Bālāk Dās, although he himself is aware of its tantric origins, sees vajroli-mudrā as a method of internal cleansing similar to basti, the yogic auto-enema. In this respect, rather than a technique for attaining siddhi, magical power, it resembles Jayatarāma’s far-fetched cleansing practice mentioned above, in which water is drawn in through the anus and expelled through the penis.

Bālāk Dās also told me that vajroli-mudrā enables him to open and close his svādhiṣṭhāna cakra at will. In the same way, he said, through mastering basti he had achieved control over his mūlādharā cakra. Opening these cakras is necessary in order to raise Kuṇḍalini up the suṣumnā nāḍī. In contrast to the teachings of

36 Some modern non-Vaiṣṇava commentators and practitioners of hathayoga have even more trouble than the Tyāgīs in accepting the practice of vajroli-mudrā. Vasu’s 1914 edition of the Śivasāntakā omits its description entirely “as it is an obscene practice indulged in by low class Tantrists” (p. 51). Rieker’s commentary on the Hathapradīpipā written in 1972 under the guidance of B.K.S. Iyengar, a well-known hathayoga teacher from Pune, describes the vajroli-, sahajaoli- and amaro-li- mudrās as “a few obscure and repugnant practices…a yoga that has nothing but its name in common with the yoga of a Patanjali or a Ramakrishna” (1992:127).
hathayogic texts, however, Bālak Dās does not believe that mastery of a set of practices can ensure that Kuṇḍalini will rise. For him the Vaiṣṇava idea of grace (prasāda) is necessary for that. All he can do is practise hathayoga assiduously and repeat the name of Lord Rām in the hope that He will bring about bhagavān-prāpti.

Conclusion

The Rāmāṇandī Tyāgīs are the dominant ascetic order in north India today and heirs to an ancient ascetic tradition. The Nāthīs’ dominance of the ascetic milieu in medieval times ensured that their hallmark soteriological technique, hathayoga, became an essential part of the ascetic tradition. It was thus taken on by the Tyāgīs. Tyāgīs frame their spiritual practices in the terminology of hathayoga, and refer to themselves as jogīs in many of their mantras. Dedicated practice of hathayoga is rare among them, but can be found.

Hathayoga has roots in Śaiva tantric practices, but has become so mainstream that its unorthodox heritage has long been forgotten. Only the blatantly “left-hand” practice of vajrōlimudrā needs reinterpretation by the Vaiṣṇava Rāmāṇandīs.

Although the Rāmāṇandīs accept hathayoga as part of ascetic practice, nirguṇa bhakti and the repetition of the name of Lord Rām are always seen as the true path to emancipation. To some, like Bālak Dās, the techniques of hathayoga help to prepare the body for god’s grace and can lead to the attainment of siddhis along the way, but to many Tyāgīs they are little more than a sideshow.

Patronage is the key to any monastic order’s survival. Asceticism’s long history in India is testament to its appeal to the Indian populace. Ascetics are living embodiments of otherworldliness, of the idea that there is more to life than our regular mundane existence. The magical powers said to result from the mastery of hathayoga confirm that otherworldliness and they have a strong grasp on the imagination of the Indian laity. The Tyāgīs’ Vaiṣṇavism, on the other hand, is usually of little consequence to their devotees, who are attracted to them in the same way that they might be attracted to any ascetic: for his charisma and his

37See e.g. Burghart 1991:110–111.
38Jogi is a vernacular form for yogī. See e.g. the bhasma gāyatrī mantra on pp. 30–32 of the Siddhānt Pāṭal.
39Once when Bālak Dās was staying by a tributary of the Godavari near Nasik, he filled his bladder with milk as an exercise in his practice of vajrōlimudrā. When he was relieving himself he inadvertently let himself be seen by a man from the nearby village. Despite Bālak Dās’s protestations, news quickly spread throughout the village that the sādhu staying out by the river urinated milk. Devotees thronged to him.
possession of certain archetypal ascetic qualities, of which mastery of haṭhayoga may be one.

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