

Rāmānandī Tyāgīs and *Haṭhayoga*

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The Vaiṣṇava Rāmānandīs are probably the largest renunciate sect in North India.¹ The biggest subsection of the Rāmānandīs 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 *laṅgoṭīs*, 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 *dhūnis*, perpetually smouldering fires, and are fond of smoking *gāñjā* 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

¹Historical and ethnographic studies of the Rāmānandīs can be found in BURGHART (1978, 1980, 1983), VAN DER VEER (1988) and GROSS (1992).

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 *tulasī* 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 baṭu*. 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.

Śaivism,⁴ some to tantric Śaivism,⁵ some to the Nāths,⁶ some to the Sūfīs,⁷ some to the Sants⁸ and some to the tradition of antinomian asceticism characterised as that of the *avadhūta*.⁹

Monastic orders rise and fall and this is reflected in the relative prosperity of today's three main orders.¹⁰ The Nāths 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 Dasnāmīs, who achieved prominence after copying the organisational structure of the Sūfī institutions that had come to power in large parts of India (CLARK 2004). Meanwhile, in the eighteenth century, the Rāmānandīs 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 *Pāśupatasūtra* 1.2.

⁵Tyāgīs explain their appearance as an imitation of that of Rāma when he lived in the forest as an ascetic; the other orders imitate Śiva. One of the earliest references to imitating one's tutelary deity as part of one's *sādhana* is found in the *Picumata* or *Brahmayāmalatantra* (National Archives Kathmandu MS No. 3-370, f. 326r³ to f. 327v³). I am grateful to Professor Alexis Sanderson for providing me with this reference.

⁶The Nāths are the oldest of the four orders and are the originators of *haṭhayoga* which is practised to some degree by all the orders.

⁷The use of cannabis for spiritual intoxication was introduced to India by wandering Sūfī ascetics in around 1400CE (SANDERSON 2003: n.43). I suspect that the exalted position of the *dhūni* and the associated use of *cimtā*, fire-tongs, were also a Sūfī innovation but more research is needed to confirm this. In the *dharmasāstras*, ascetics are forbidden from using fire (e.g. *Mānavadharmasāstra* 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 Sūfīs' use of fires and fire-tongs to give the *dhūni* the importance it now has.

⁸The *nirguṇa 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 (*nirguṇa*) 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. Gorakhnāthīs, Udāsīs and Dasnāmīs are much given to the shouting of *alakh* (Sanskrit *alakṣya*), “imperceptible”, a word often used to describe the divine in *nirguṇa* poetry. The *Siddhānt Patal*, a Tyāgī ritual handbook in Hindi, is full of *nirguṇa* terms. In its opening verse the divine is described as the *alakh puruṣ*. Tyāgīs do not worship anthropomorphic images of Rāma but use *sālagrāmas*, black ammonite stones from the Gaṇḍakī river in Nepal. Dasnāmīs worship *narmadeśvaras*, polished stones from the bed of the river Narmadā.

⁹*Avadhūta* (“shaken off”) denotes an ascetic who has cast off worldly cares. All four orders refer to themselves as *avadhūtas* and worship Dattātreyā, the archetypal *avadhūta*.

¹⁰I do not include the Udāsīs 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 Eklingjī, the tutelary deity of the Maharanas of Udaipur, was originally in the hands of Pāsupatas. Inscriptions show that it then fell under the control of the Nāths before being taken over by the Dasnāmīs (TAMTREŚ n.d.).¹¹ The Nāth centre at Galta was taken over by the Rāmānandīs in the 16th century (CLÉMENTIN-OJHA 1999:28, BURGHART 1978:127). The temple of Hanumān Gaṛhi in Ayodhya is said to have been a site of worship for Nāths and Muslim fakirs until it was taken over by the Dasnāmīs. Then, in the eighteenth century the Dasnāmīs were driven out by a Rāmānandī called Abhayrām Dās (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 *haṭhayoga* often said to have first been taught by Gorakhnāth, the third guru of the Nāths after Ādināth and Matsyendranāth.¹² However, dedicated practice of *haṭhayoga* is in fact rare among ascetics of all orders. On this point VAN DER VEER remarks about the Tyāgīs (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 Tyāgīs, BURGHART makes no mention of yoga. For most Tyāgīs, *tapas*, asceticism, is more important than yoga. The austerity most widely practised by the Rāmānandīs is *dhūni-tap*, in which the ascetic sits surrounded by smouldering cow-dung fires under the

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

¹²The Nāths' rise in influence was in no small part due to their mastery of *haṭhayoga*. Other orders found it necessary to appropriate its techniques in order to compete with them for patronage. Thus, for example, passages from Nāth texts on *haṭhayoga* were used to compile new works in order to make up the corpus of 108 *upaniṣads* which were commented on by the Advaita Vedāntin Upaniṣadbrahmayogin (BOUY 1994).

midday summer sun. At the end of the practice many Tyāgīs will perform a few haṭhayogic āsanas, and this is usually the extent of their practice of yoga.

Unlike VAN DER VEER and BURGHART, my fieldwork among the Rāmānandīs 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

Rāmānandī Practitioners of *haṭhayoga*

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

The *bābā* was Śrī Rām Bālak Dās Yogīrāj, a *mahant* of the Terah Bhāi Tyāgī suborder of the Rāmānandī Tyāgīs. Bālak Dās was born into a Rājput 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 Yogīrāj, a Tyāgī *śrīmahant* 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 *kāyakaḷpa*.¹⁶

¹³The 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 Kumbha 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 *amṛta*, 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. *Haṭhapradīpikā* 3.82–89, *Śivasamhitā* 4.78–104 and *Dattātreyayogaśāstra* 299–314) and in more detail in the later *Haṭharatnāvalī* (2.80–112) and *Bṛhatkhecarīprakāśa* (f. 103r¹¹–f. 104r⁶). DARMON (2002) gives an ethnographic account of *vajrolīmudrā* as carried out by Śākta yogins at Tārāpīṭh in Bengal.

¹⁶To undergo *kāyakaḷpa*, 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 *kāyakaḷpa* are described in the fourth *paṭala* of the *Khecarīvidyā* and in the *Kākacaṇḍīśvarakaḷpatantra*. A modern account of the practice is given in ANANTHA MURTHY

Donations from Prahlād Dās’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 *jamāt*, an itinerant monastery.

Prahlād Dās initiated Rām Bālak Dās as his *celā* and after a few years started to teach him yoga. He soon mastered *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*, and Prahlād Dās decided to teach him more advanced practices including *basti*, a method of auto-enema in which the yogin uses a technique called *nauli*¹⁷ to create a vacuum in the stomach and draw water into the intestines. He was then taught *vajrolīmudrā*. By inserting specially made golden probes of steadily increasing length and diameter into Bālak Dās’s urethra, Prahlād Dās opened it up and removed a piece of gristle (Hindī *māms* in Bālak Dās’s words) at its top end. This piece of gristle, said Bālak Dās, acts as a valve, so by using *nauli*, Bālak Dās was then able to suck fluids up his urethra into his bladder.

At Bālak Dās’s suggestion, I went to Delhi to meet Śrī Nainā Dās Jī Yogīrāj, an elderly and well respected Rāmānandī Nāgā who had been an accomplished *haṭhayogin* when he was younger. He too had mastered *vajrolīmudrā*, as well as *khecarīmudrā*. 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 Śrī Paraśurām Dās Jī Yogīrāj, an itinerant Tyāgī *mahant*, and told that he was an accomplished *haṭhayogin*. One evening I asked him about *khecarīmudrā*. He replied that such practices were not suitable for a *sādhāraṇ vyakti*, an “ordinary individual”. That night we waited for the autumn full moon to reach its zenith before eating platefuls of *khīr*, rice pudding, into which the moon had poured *amṛta*, the nectar of immortality. The next morning Bālak Dās told me to look at Paraśurām Dās. His mouth was wide open and he was demonstrating *khecarīmudrā*. He then deigned to discuss it with me. It is *samādhi kā aṅg*, a constituent part of *samādhi*. He had learnt it here and there from other *sādhus*, not from one guru. It enabled him to drink *amṛta* and thereby go without food for two to three days at a time.

When Paraśurām Dās said that *khecarīmudrā* was a part of *samādhi* he did not mean the eighth *aṅga* of Patañjali’s *aṣṭāṅga* yoga, but the celebrated yogic practice of remaining in meditation for long periods of time, usually underground. Because it suppresses hunger and thirst, *khecarīmudrā* is often said to be an important part of this technique.¹⁸ During my fieldwork, I have heard rumours of Tyāgīs who are

1986.

¹⁷On *nauli* see e.g. *Hathapradīpikā* 2.34–35.

¹⁸See *Bṛhatkhecarīprakāśa* f. 72v⁷. Many of the historical reports of *bhūmigat samādhi* mention the yogin’s use of *khecarīmudrā*: HONIGBERGER (1852:129) and Sir Claude Wade (BRAID 1850:13) describe it in the case of the Rāmānandī Hari Dās; 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.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 Jī Yogirāj, a Rāmānandī *mahant* 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 *jiskā varṇan kiyā nahim jāyegā*, “which cannot be described”.

In Rishikesh I met Śrī Bālyogī Lāl Jī Bhāī. 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 Raghuvar Dās Jī 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 haṭhayogic practice and an implicitly superior *rājayoga* variety, which was purely mental.²⁰ Raghuvar 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.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 *āmlā* (*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 *haṭhayoga* 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

¹⁹At 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.

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

²¹This practice is part of yogic lore. Ballāla, in the *Bṛhatkhecarīprakāśa*, 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. 72v⁶: *anye bahvabhyāsena jñātā-bhyaṃtaranāḍīviśeṣamardanēnāpi taṃ kurvaṃti kārayaṃti ca*).

influenced their assessments. Almost all of my informants 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 *haṭhayoga* 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 *haṭhayoga*. At his ashram near Pīmpalgāmv in the Nāsik district of Maharashtra, Bālak Dās had constructed a room equipped for the performance of yogic *kriyās* such as *basti* and *vajrolīmudrā* 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 *haṭhayoga* 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 *haṭhayoga*, 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 *haṭhayoga* written in 964 Braj Bhāṣā verses, using *dohā*, *sortḥā* and *caupāi* metres. Jayatarāma drew extensively from various Sanskrit works on *haṭhayoga* to compose the text,²⁵ in particular the long recension of the *Haṭhapradīpikā*.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 *haṭhayoga* together with some more unusual ones. Thus, within the framework of the eight *aṅgas* of Patañjali's

²²See HONIGBERGER 1852:127–131.

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*, *cūḍāmaṇi*, *jognidh*, *jogprakās*, *jogsamghitā*, *jogsamghi*, *mūrātsamghitā*, *haṭhpradīpikā*, *gorakhsat*, *tatpradīpakā* and *jognāgavali*.

²⁶There are several different recensions of the *Haṭhapradīpikā*. 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.

aṣṭāṅga yoga, we hear of ten *yamas*, ten *niyamas*, eighty-four *āsanas*, six cleansing practices (*śaṭkarmas*), eight types of breath-retention (*kumbhaka* or *prāṇāyāma*), twenty-four *mudrās*, *oṃkāra*, *pratyāhāra*, *dhāraṇās* of the five elements, *kālajñāna* (how to predict one's time of death), *kālavañcana* (how to cheat death when it arrives), *dhyāna*, *parakāyapraveśana* (how to enter another's body), the balancing of *vāyu* by drinking rice and lentil gruel (*javāgu*), descriptions of the ten *nāḍīs* and ten *vāyus*, supplementary cleansing techniques, an extended description of *khecarīmudrā*, descriptions of the six *cakras* and instructions on *samādhi*.²⁷

Unlike other manuals of *haṭhayoga*, the chief deities of the *Jogpradīpakā* are Sītā and Rāma (Hindī 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 *ākaraṣaṇī 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 Siyārām inside the thousand-petalled lotus.²⁸

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

²⁷Several of the practices described are not found in Sanskrit manuals of *haṭhayoga* and Jayatarāma also gives new names to established practices. Thus *vajrolīmudrā* is called *viraja*, *bījarūpaṇī* and *vīra mudrā* at vv. 552–561 (it is also referred to in passing as *vajrolīmudrā* 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 *Jogpradīpakā* 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.

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

²⁹Although 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), *kapālī āsana* (vv.115–117), *siva āsana* (118–121), *aghora āsana* (vv. 205–209), *rudra āsana* (vv. 227–230), *sivaliṅga āsana* (vv. 233–234). Similarly, other practices have names which clearly originate in the Nāth tradition: *gorakhjālī āsana* (vv. 85–87), *machamdra āsana* (vv. 91–94), *bhadragorakha āsana* (vv. 131–133), and the *carpaṭcok*, *gvālīpāv*, *kanerīpāv*, *hālīpāv*, *mīḍakīpāv*, *jalamdhripāv*, *gopīcamḍ* and *bhartharī āsanas* described at vv. 254–275, which are all named after Nāth Siddhas.

³⁰See 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.³¹ The description of the *bījarūpaṇī 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).³²

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 *saṃpradāya* 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.³³ The Rāmānandī Tyāgīs are natural heirs to the ascetic tradition of yoga,³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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

³¹Cf. *Hathapradīpikā* 3.41.

³²Contrast this with the *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā*, 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*.

³³In a simplification of the complex situation which is revealed in the many texts of *haṭhayoga*, the c. 14th century *Śārṅgadhara-paddhati* (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*.

³⁴The best textual witness of this tradition is the *Dattātreyayogaśāstra*, an early *haṭhayogic* manual relatively free of tantric elements.

³⁵On 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 Kuṇḍalinī 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 *haṭhayoga*'s Śaiva tantric heritage does pose problems for the Tyāgīs. The most obvious example of this is *vajrolīmudrā*, 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. *Vajrolīmudrā*'s unorthodox “left-hand” tantric origins are obvious. Writing about its practice at Tārāpīṭh in Bengal, DARMON says that “seul un nombre infime de yogis parmi les *vāmācāri* effectue les opérations de ce type” (2002:214). So how can a Rāmānandī Tyāgī justify the practice of *vajrolīmudrā*?

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 *haṭhayoga* take this to its extremes and thus Bālak Dās, although he himself is aware of its tantric origins, sees *vajrolīmudrā* 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.

Bālak Dās also told me that *vajrolīmudrā* 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 *mūlādhāra cakra*. Opening these *cakras* is necessary in order to raise Kuṇḍalinī up the *suṣumṇā nāḍī*. In contrast to the teachings of

³⁶Some modern non-Vaiṣṇava commentators and practitioners of *haṭhayoga* have even more trouble than the Tyāgīs in accepting the practice of *vajrolīmudrā*. Vasu's 1914 edition of the *Śivasamhitā* omits its description entirely “as it is an obscene practice indulged in by low class Tantrists” (p. 51). RIEKER's commentary on the *Haṭhapradīpikā* written in 1972 under the guidance of B.K.S. Iyengar, a well-known *haṭhayoga* teacher from Pune, describes the *vajrolī-*, *sahajolī-* and *amarolī-* *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).

haṭhayogic texts, however, Bālak Dās does not believe that mastery of a set of practices can ensure that Kuṇḍalinī will rise. For him the Vaiṣṇava idea of grace (*prasāda*) is necessary for that. All he can do is practise *haṭhayoga* assiduously and repeat the name of Lord Rām in the hope that He will bring about *bhagavān-prāpti*.

Conclusion

The Rāmānandī Tyāgīs are the dominant ascetic order in north India today and heirs to an ancient ascetic tradition. The Nāths' dominance of the ascetic milieu in medieval times ensured that their hallmark soteriological technique, *haṭhayoga*, 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 *haṭhayoga*,³⁷ and refer to themselves as *jogīs* in many of their mantras.³⁸ Dedicated practice of *haṭhayoga* is rare among them, but can be found.

Haṭhayoga 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 *vajrolīmudrā* needs reinterpretation by the Vaiṣṇava Rāmānandīs.

Although the Rāmānandīs accept *haṭhayoga* 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 *haṭhayoga* 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 *haṭhayoga* confirm that otherworldliness and they have a strong grasp on the imagination of the Indian laity.³⁹ 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.

³⁸*Jogī* is a vernacular form for *yogī*. See e.g. the *bhasmā gāyatrī mantra* on pp. 30–32 of the *Siddhānt Paṭal*.

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 *vajrolīmudrā*. 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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