

Review

David N. Lorenzen and Adrián Muñoz (eds), *Yogi Heroes. Histories and Legends of the Nāths*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011. xviii + 228 pp. \$75.00. ISBN 9781438438917 (hardback). \$24.95. ISBN 9781438438900 (paperback).

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This book has three merits: it fosters the interest in Naths, it provides a summative evaluation of previous studies and it presents on-going research. But *Yogi Heroes and Poets* goes beyond the study of Nathism as just doctrine. It is an anthropology of Indic asceticism, and a lively portrait of Nath culture and its reception.

The book is divided in two sections ('Yogis in History' and 'Theology and Folklore') and is preceded by a contextual introduction by the editors. The four chapters in the first section move from analyses of Nathism across and beyond faith-based exegeses, and insist on key features such as the formless Absolute and the uncompromising dismissal of sectarian rituals, dogmas and norms. Two underlying threads emerge, namely the conflict between the logic of the renouncer and that of the householder, on the one hand, and the way of the Tantrika (a biased path—mostly because of the impact of Shaktism) as opposed to the Shaiva yogin.

The areas of inquiry are, however, different. In the opening chapter, 'The Naths in Hindi Literature' (pp. 3–18), Purushottam Agrawal examines (not easily accessible) literary historiographies on Nāths as a key-role player in defining *lok dharma* ('non-caste Hinduism'). Chapter 2, 'Religious Identity in Gorakhnath and Kabir. Hindus, Muslims, Yogis, and Sants' (pp. 19–50), by David Lorenzen, explores the idea of religious pluralism and the flexibility of community boundaries in pre-colonial India. Daniel Gold's 'Drums in Gwalior: Maharashtrian Nath Heritages in a North Indian City' (pp. 51–62) reports on the Dholi Buwa lineage and the Raja Bhakshar. While both schools attracted different communities (Vaishnavas, Sufis, etc.), a traditional hard-core ascetic order like the Nath-panth is shown capable of successfully meeting the expectations of urban Hindus without renouncing its core teachings. In Chapter 4, 'Influence of the Naths on Bhima Bhoi and Mahima Dharma' (pp. 63–76), Ishita Banerjee-Dube examines how Nath philosophy penetrated the ideology of Mahima Dharma, a radical religious movement of nineteenth-century

Orissa, and argues that the struggle of Mahima Swami and his disciple Bhima Boi hides the social prejudice towards (Shakta) Tantrism, and thus suggests a tendency to distance women from yogic practices.

The second part of the book is less cohesive, although one can see the effort to produce a contextual hermeneutics of Nathism. David G. White elaborates material previously discussed in his book, *Sinister Yogis* (2009). ‘On the Magnitude of the Yogic Body’ (pp. 79–90), examines the third chapter—*Pinḍa Saṃvitti* (‘Comprehensive knowledge of the body’)—of the *Siddha-siddhānta-paddhati*, a text attributed to Gorakhnāth. White objects the classic interpretation of the human body as a microcosm of the macrocosm thus confirming that in Nāth gnoseology the yogin is the one who acknowledges the actual identity between body and universe, and eventually becomes Śiva.

In Chapter 6, ‘Awakening Generosity in Nath Tales from Rajasthan’ (pp. 91–108), Ann Godzins Gold explores contemporary beliefs on Nāth mendicancy and the practice of almsgiving in Ghathyali. A way to allow the transmission of a praxis of detachment and to divulge knowledge, this social schema is now growing obsolete. As Gold explains, the loss of meaning of Nath itinerant performers’ symbolic capital is surpassed by other—more consolidated—forms of economic capital (e.g. landownership).

Adrián Muñoz and Lubomír Ondračka discuss the tale of Matsyendranath who—after arriving in the Kingdom of Women—is lured into earthly pleasures by Queen Mainakini and her 1600 courtesans only to be rescued by Goraknath 12 years later. In Muñoz’s chapter, ‘Matsyendra’s “Golden Legend”: Yogi Tales and Nath Ideology’ (pp. 109–28), the story is not just a eulogy of the virtues of yogic asceticism. In fact, it exemplifies two contrasting ideologies, namely Kaula Tantric praxis (including erotic ritualism), traditionally associated to Matsyendranath, and later hermeneutical attempts to domesticate sexual practices and imagery by means of the celebration of the way of the householder, as in the *Gorakh-bani*.

Ondračka responds to the question: ‘What Should Mīnanāth Do to Save His Life?’ (pp. 129–42) and moves from a Bengali version of the same legend. Here Minanāth (i.e. Matsyendranāth) defends himself and asserts he is acting like Śiva. Further—being now of old age—he cannot go back to his previous ascetic life. The solution to the dilemma is envisaged by Gorakhnāth in the secret yogic practice of the ‘four moons’, generally identified as four bodily fluids. Moving from an exploration of rituals in Kaula circles, Sahajiya and Bengali yogic Sufism, the author provides elements for a further hermeneutics of esoteric physiology in North-eastern Nathism.

The last chapter, ‘The *Matsyendrasaṃhitā*: A Yoginī-centered Thirteenth-century Text from the South Indian Śāmbhava Cult’ (pp. 143–62) by Csaba Kiss, is a clear-cut analysis of *haṭha yogic* notions among the Nāths as proof of a particular—though not unique—moment in the history of yoga when Nāthism tried to disengage itself from dominant traditions (e.g. Śaiva Tantra). The elimination of sectarian boundaries and the importance attributed to

well-known practices such as *cakra*-centred (*haṭha*) yoga is explained as both revitalization and perpetuation of the inclusiveness of yoga.

The many approaches (textual exegesis, philosophy, ethnography, historiography, sociology, language and literature, etc.) used in this book may give the impression of an intimidating and somehow discordant pluralism of interpretations. This reviewer, however, found such richness fitting the multifaceted essence of Nathism itself. If a critique should be advanced, it could be pointed out that much of the scholarship here contained is 'work in progress'. In that the book is a useful point of departure for further analyses.