

Nāth Sampradāya

The Nāth Sampradāya today comprises an order of renunciate ascetics and a householder caste, both of which trace their lineages to a group of nine Nāth *gurus* headed by Ādinātha (“First Nāth”), who is identified with the god → Śiva. Next in most lists of nine Nāths comes Matsyendranātha, followed by Gorakṣanātha (Gorakhnāth), who is said to have founded the Nāth order of ascetics. The earliest references to the Nāth ascetic order as an organized entity date to the beginning of the 17th century, but its first historical *gurus*, Matsyendranātha and Gorakṣanātha, lived much earlier, probably in the 9th and 12th centuries, respectively, and during the intermediate period there are numerous references to both ascetic and householder Nāths in texts, inscriptions, iconography, and historical reports. In this article, the

features that characterize the Nāth Sampradāya today will be summarized (for a more detailed ethnography of today’s Nāths, see Bouillier, 2008; see also → Kānphaṭās), followed by an examination of their historicity: Nāths today claim that their characteristics were introduced by Gorakṣa when he founded the Sampradāya, but many are of more recent origin. Aspects of Nāth identity that are shared with other groups, such as the Nāth ascetics’ observance of typical Hindu renouncers’ vows (see → *sādhus*), will not be examined in detail.

Today the ascetic branch of the Nāth Sampradāya is quite distinct from that of the householders. Membership of the former is open to all and effected by initiation from an ascetic Nāth *guru*. Householder Nāths greatly outnumber ascetics



Fig. 1: Two ascetics, early 19th century. On the right is a Kānphaṭā Nāth (© British Library – India Office Select Materials, Shelfmark Add.27255, f.399b).

and consist of a broad variety of mainly endogamous castes. They see themselves as descendants of Nāth ascetics who broke their vows of celibacy and settled down as householders. Householder Nāths are found throughout India and Nepal, with certain regions, such as Karnataka, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Nepal, having higher concentrations than others. The various householder Nāth castes include a wide range of social groups, from low-status Muslim bards in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to relatively high-status Sanskritized *jogīs* (Hind. *yogī*) and Nāths in → Rajasthan and → Karnataka, respectively.

The ascetic Nāth order is overseen by an organization called the Akhil Bharatvarshiya Avadhoot Bhash Barah Panth Yogi Mahasabha (“The All-Indian Great Assembly of the Renunciate Yogis of the Twelve Lineages”), which was founded in 1906 and whose headquarters are in Haridwar. There are approximately eight to ten thousand Nāth ascetics in India today (Bouillier, 2008, 15). Their monasteries, which number about five hundred, are found mostly in northern and western India. There are also a handful of monasteries in each of the following regions of the subcontinent: Bihar, Bengal, Assam, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Nepal, and Pakistan.

Nāth ascetics may be *sthāndhārī*, sedentary, but most are itinerant. A troop of Nāth ascetics that is known as the *jamāt* and has a floating population of about one hundred wanders continuously about India, reinforcing the collective Nāth ascetic identity by attending important Nāth festivals. These festivals recur in annual and longer cycles. *Navarātra* is spent at Jwalamukhi in Himachal Pradesh and *kārttikpūrṇimā* (full moon in Oct–Nov) at Pushkar in Rajasthan. During the month of *māgh* (Jan–Feb), a Nāth *melā* is held at Pushkar, from which the *jamāt* travels to Girnar to celebrate *śivarātrī*. The *jamāt* attends all of the triennial *kumbhamelās*. After the *kumbhamelā* held every 12 years at Nasik (the next being in 2016), the *jamāt* spends six months walking to the Nāth monastery at Kadri, near Mangalore in Karnataka, to install on *śivarātrī* a new *rājā yogī* (see below), who is elected at the Nasik *melā* and walks with the *jamāt*.

The appearance and lifestyle of Nāth ascetics are very similar to those of other North Indian ascetics, in particular the → Daśanāmī *nāgā samṇyāsīs*, → Rāmānandī *tyāgīs*, and Udāsīs (see → *sādhus*). They are celibate, they wear loincloths

and *dhotīs* (never undergarments or trousers), they cover their bodies in ash, and they often wear their hair in *jaṭā*, dreadlocks, although several Nāths keep their hair short. They live by a *dhūni* or sacred fire, and many smoke cannabis. There are very few female ascetic Nāths.

The Nāth order is traditionally associated with the practice of *yoga* and → Tantra, certain varieties of which are said to have originated from their first *gurus*, Matsyendra and Gorakṣa, but today few pursue either very assiduously. Despite their founder’s reputation as its first teacher, almost no Nāths practice Haṭha Yoga (see → Yoga). The initiatory, funereal, and other important rituals of the order are tantric, with the goddess Bālā/Tripurāsundarī (see → Kashmir) being the focus of worship, but for many ascetic Nāths, their daily religious observance consists of living a renunciate life and worshipping the order’s deities and *gurus* in a manner consistent with typical North Indian → *bhakti*. The central object of worship in several monasteries, and for the itinerant *jamāt*, is the *pātr*, a pot containing items emblematic of the Nāths: the *siṅgnād janeū*, earrings, a → *rudrākṣa mālā*, and a chillum, the clay pipe used for smoking cannabis (Bouillier, 2008, 43).

The religious life of householder Nāths also consists for the most part in devotional practices, in particular the communal singing of *bhajans* (see → *kīrtan* and *bhajan*), as well as listening to public performances of Nāth bards singing epic romances about legendary Nāth ascetics, kings, and heroes. In some regions, Nāth householders function as hereditary temple priests (e.g. Nepal: Bouillier, 1986). Certain communities of Rajasthan Nāth householders engage in secret sexual rites (Gold, 2002). Like their ascetic counterparts, Nāth householders are usually buried after death.

All Nāths, whether ascetics or householders, wear around their necks the *siṅgnād janeū*, a long black woollen thread on which a very small horn, a *rudrākṣa* seed, and a ring are strung. The horn (which is really more of a whistle) is blown during certain rituals and before eating. Most Nāth ascetics and a diminishing number of householders wear thick, hooped earrings in slits cut in the cartilages (not the lobes) of their ears, because of which they are also known as → Kānphaṭā (“split-eared”) *yogīs*, a somewhat derogatory name that is eschewed by Nāths themselves. All Nāths hail one another with the greeting “*ādes*” (see below). They are Śaiva, often worshipping Śiva as → Bhairava, a form associated with tantric practice.

Elements of Nāth Identity

The Name “Nāth”

The use of the name “Nāth” (Skt. *nātha*) to denote an order of human ascetics is relatively recent, dating to approximately the 18th century (*SidPad.* 5.43; **Ādeśapadavyākhyā* folio 17, recto line 1; folio 18, recto line 8). Before this time the members of the various ascetic lineages that were to become the Nāth Sampradāya were known as *yogīs* (as they still are in the name of the modern “Nāth” organization, the above-mentioned Yogi Mahasabha). Householder “Nāths” were also known thus, and it was not until the 20th century that they began to refer to themselves as Nāths, in a bid to elevate their status and escape the pejorative connotations of the name *yogī/jogī*, which had come to be associated with low-status castes and mendicant orders (Gold, 1992, 51). This has happened only in Rajasthan; elsewhere householder “Nāths” are still for the most part known as *yogīs* or *jogīs*.

The names of some of the early Nāth *gurus* did sometimes bear the suffix *-nātha*, but other suffixes are also found, including *-pāda*, *-pā*, *-deva*, and *-āī*; very often the early *gurus*’ names are found without any suffix at all. Meanwhile many humans and gods with no connection with the Nāth Sampradāya have names that bear the suffix *-nātha*, for example, the Jaina saints Ādinātha, Pārśvanātha, and so on; the 16th-century *guru* of the → Vallabha Sampradāya, Viṭṭhalnāth; → Kṛṣṇa as Gopināth, the lord of the shepherd girls; and → Viṣṇu as Jagannāth at Puri (see → Orissa). In a modern gazetteer, a group of five Vaiṣṇava → *tīrthas* spread across India is known as the Pañc Nāth (*Tīrthāñk*, 561). From at least the 10th century (see below), we find groupings of semidivine Nāths, but they are not associated with a human “Nāth” Sampradāya. Prior to the 18th century, when the word *nātha/nāth* is found on its own, whether in Sanskrit or a regional language, it simply means “Lord” and is usually used to address a god or an important person. Many commentators and scholars have seized upon instances of the word or suffix *-nātha* as indicative of the existence of a Nāth Sampradāya, but until the 18th century, the word was not used as such. The hybrid Hindi/Sanskrit term “Nāth *siddha*,” which is commonly used in secondary literature to denote members of the ascetic Nāth Sampradāya throughout the ages, is not found in premodern literature.

It might be supposed that the forerunners of the Nāths were denoted by the name “*yogī*,” but this term is also ambiguous as it has been used, at least until the modern period, to denote *yoga*-practicing ascetics belonging to a wide range of orders, in particular those of the Daśanāmī *saṃnyāsīs* and Rāmānandīs. In the absence of nomenclature as a definitive criterion for identifying “Nāths” and in the light of there being no evidence of an organized pan-Indian order of Nāths prior to the beginning of the 17th century, in order to analyze the history of the Nāth Sampradāya during its formative period, the history of the various elements that constitute Nāth identity today will now be examined in turn. At the risk of historical inaccuracy, for the sake of convenience, the forerunners of the members of what is now known as the Nāth Sampradāya are herein usually referred to as “Nāths.”

The Nine Nāths

While there are some relatively early (c. 10th-century) descriptions of groupings of Nāths (see below), the tradition of nine Nāths to which today’s Nāth Sampradāya traces its origins has more names in common with those found in early lists of *siddhas* than in early lists of Nāths. The *siddhas* were semidivine humans who had become perfected (*siddha*) as a result of their mastery of *yoga*, alchemy (→ *rasāyana*), and other esoteric means. They were renowned for their magical powers (*siddhis*) and, often, their antinomian behavior. All these features are attributed to the various nine Nāths associated with the Nāth Sampradāya. Early lists of *siddhas* (which usually name, or purport to name, 84), such as those found in the 13th-century Tibetan account ascribed to Abhayadattaśrī, the early 14th-century Maithili *Varṇaratnākara* (57), and the 15th-century Sanskrit *Haṭhāpradīpikā* (1.5–1.8), include Ādinātha, Matsyendra, Gorakṣa, Caurāṅgī, Jālandhara, Carpaṭa, Kānhapa, and Bhartṛhari, all of whom appear in some or all of the later lists of the nine Nāths.

The popularity of the *siddhas* transcended sectarian boundaries, and the *siddhas* themselves appear from their legends not to have claimed allegiance to any particular sects. Because of the appearance of the names of *siddhas* associated with the Nāth tradition in Buddhist lists of *siddhas*, such as that of Abhayadattaśrī, some scholars have postulated Buddhist origins for the Nāths. There is nothing in the doctrines associated with the Nāth tradition to support this.

First in most of the lists of nine Nāths is Ādinātha (“First Nāth”), who is identified with Śiva. While the Nāth tradition is and always has been predominantly Śaiva, recent centuries have seen an increased emphasis on this aspect of their identity. Nāths depicted in medieval miniatures do not sport the archetypally Śaiva *rudrākṣa* seed necklaces and *tripuṇḍra* ash forehead markings that are commonplace today. Gorakṣanāth nowadays is often identified with Śiva, supplanting Ādinātha. A popular Hindi Nāth → *mantra* is *om śiv gorakṣ*.

There is a great deal of variety in the number and names of the members of the many lists of the Nāths after Ādinātha (see e.g. Dvivedi, 1996, 25–27; White, 1996, 90–95). Early taxonomies of Nāths found in texts of tantric traditions associated with forerunners of the Nāth Sampradāya do not agree on their number: those of the Kubjikā cult (see → Kashmir, → Bhairava) talk of 25 (Sanderson, 2009, 297n704), other works of the Paścimāmnāya (the “Western Transmission” of Kaula Tantra) and those of the Trika (see → Tantra) and → Kālī cults give lists of four (Sanderson, 1988, 688), the *Ṣaṣṣāhasrasamhitā* describes 18 (Schoterman, 1982, 35–38), and the 13th-century *Matsyendrasamhitā* (9.9) mentions a group of seven (see also Kiss, 2009, 36–38). None of these lists includes Gorakṣa (or Śiva) among its Nāths; only those of the Trika and Kālī cults or the later Śāmbhava variant of Śaivism (on the latter see Kiss, 2009, 40) include Matsyendra. The first list of Nāths to include Gorakṣa is in an inscription from near the Kalleśvara Temple at Kukkunoor in Karnataka dated to 1279 (Lewis Rice, 1903, 154–155). This list, which includes the names of eight (or possibly nine) Nāths, does not mention Matsyendra but does include Ādinātha.

The earliest text to give a list of nine Nāths that corresponds with those later associated with the Nāth Sampradāya is the Telegu *Navanāthacaritra* (Deeds of the Nine Nāths), which dates to the late 15th century (Rao, Shulman & Subrahmanyam, 1992, 125). This text’s nine Nāths include Śiva, Mīna (i.e. Matsyendra), Gorakṣa, Sāraṅadhara (i.e. Cauraṅgī), and Nāgārjuna. The nine Nāths are not mentioned in any of the Sanskrit texts on Haṭha Yoga associated with the Nāths; in fact, no Sanskrit texts include lists of nine Nāths associated with the Nāth Sampradāya prior to the approximately 18th-century *Gorakṣasiddhāntasamgraha*, which cites a list from a *Tantramahārṇava*, a work

of doubtful antiquity, doubt compounded by its inclusion of → Dattātreyā in its list of Nāths. Dattātreyā has only ever been associated with the Nāth Sampradāya in the Deccan region, and the formalization of that association dates to approximately the 18th century, when texts such as the Marathi *Navanāthabhaktisāra* symbolically united the Nāth Sampradāya with the → Mahānubhāv sect by identifying nine Nāths with nine Nārāyaṇas. The nine Nāths are not mentioned in the approximately 17th-century Hindi works ascribed to Gorakṣnāth, but there are references to them in the approximately 1600 CE *Gurū Granth Sāhib* (1.11; 13.3.1; 10.1 [see Callewaert, 1996, 839, 1160, 1390]), the approximately 18th-century *Siddhānt Paṭal*, a ritual handbook ascribed to Rāmānand (see Prasad *et al.*, n.d., 7, 29, 31, 33–34, 37, 40), and the *Gorakṣ Upaniṣad*, whose date is uncertain but is also likely to date to the 18th century. As a corollary of the attempts to organize various disparate groups of *yogīs* under the tutelage of Gorakṣa (see below), many lists of the nine Nāths from the 18th century and later do not include Gorakṣanātha: Gorakṣa is the godhead (he is referred to as Śrīnāth and identified with the *anādi anant puruṣ*, “the eternal person”; Dvivedi, 1996, 27), and the nine Nāths are said to be his → *avatārs*. Several Sanskrit and Hindi hagiographical works treating the deeds of the nine Nāths were composed in Jodhpur in the early 19th century. Today hagiographies of the nine Nāths are widely available in a variety of vernacular languages.

Individual Nāths

The names most commonly found in the lists of Nāths associated with the Nāth Sampradāya are those of Matsyendra and Gorakṣa, with the latter generally said to be Matsyendra’s disciple. A summary of the data and legends on these two figures is given below, followed by brief résumés of other Nāths.

Matsyendra

Matsyendra (“Lord of the Fishes”) is known by a variety of piscine names, including Mīna, Macchandar, and Macchaghna. He is associated with both the Pūrvāmnāya and Paścimāmnāya (“Eastern” and “Western”) transmissions of Kaula Tantra, as well as their later southern variant

known as Śambhava, and a variety of texts associated with these traditions are attributed to him. He is mentioned in → Abhinavagupta's approximately 1000 CE *Tantrāloka* (29.32) as a Siddha by the name of Macchanda whose consort is called Kuṅkuṅāmbā ("The Goddess from the Konkan"). This and the provenance of the texts of the cults associated with him (see below) indicate that Matsyendra lived in southern India, probably the Deccan, in the 9th to 10th centuries. He is said to have reformed the practices of the Kula, which were associated with → *yoginīs* living in cremation grounds thirsty for blood and other bodily fluids, into the slightly tamer practices of Kaulism (Sander-son, 1985, 214n110). Matsyendra's cult, as evinced by the 13th-century *Matsyendrasaṃhitā*, still involved sexual and other unorthodox practices. Nāth tradition and legends found in a number of texts including the *Matsyendrasaṃhitā* and the early 15th-century Maithili *Gorakṣavijaya* maintain that Matsyendra's disciple Gorakṣa further reformed Matsyendra's licentious ways, rescuing him from ensnarement in the land of women.

Gorakṣa

In the process of reforming the practices of Matsyendra, Gorakṣa (who is known as Gorakh in vernacular languages) is said to have founded the ascetic Nāth Sampradāya and to have been the first teacher of Haṭha Yoga, whose practices place great importance on celibacy and internalize the sexual practices of Kaula Tantra. Several Sanskrit texts on Haṭha Yoga are attributed to Gorakṣa as well as an extensive corpus of vernacular verses in the tradition of → *nirguṇa bhakti*.

The first datable references to Gorakṣa are from the early 13th century. He is mentioned in passing in the *Amṛtakaṇikodyotanibandha* of Vibhūticandra, who was born in northern Bengal toward the end of the 12th century (Stearns, 1996). Various mentions in Harihara's Kannada *Ragales* date to a similar period, in particular, the *Revaṇasiddheśvara Ragale*, in which Revaṇa defeats Gorakha in a magic contest.

Other 13th-century references to Gorakṣa can be found in the *Matsyendrasaṃhitā*, which was composed in South India (Kiss, 2009, 28); the Tibetan account of the lives of the 84 *siddhas* ascribed to Abhayadattaśrī, in which he is said to have been born in eastern India; the Kalleśvara inscription of 1279 in Karnataka, which was mentioned above; and an inscription at Somnath dated 1287 in which he is included among a list of five

deities. Two Old Marathi works, the 1278 *Līlācaritra* and the 1290 *Jñāneśvarī*, also mention Gorakṣa, but the dating of their various recensions is uncertain. Two of the earliest works on Haṭha Yoga, the *Vivekamārtaṇḍa* and the (*)*Gorakṣasataka*, which both date to the 13th century and whose teachings are similar to those on *yoga* found in the *Jñāneśvarī*, were attributed to Gorakṣa either at the time of their composition or not long afterward. These early references to Gorakṣa and the provenance of the cults and texts with which he was associated suggest that he lived in the Deccan region in the 11th to 12th centuries.

References to Gorakṣa from the 14th century are found in a list of *siddhas* in the Maithili *Varnaratnākara*; the *Śārṅgadharapaddhati* (4372–4373), which was compiled near Jaipur in 1363; a rock inscription at Itum Bahal in the Kathmandu Valley dated 1382 in which Madanarāma Vardhana, a senior minister of King Jayasthiti Malla, describes himself as *gorakhātmajaśiṣya*, "a pupil of a descendant of Gorakh" (Vajracarya, 1975, 34); and an inscription dated 1391 at the Gorakhnath cave in Pharping, also in the Kathmandu Valley, which records the building by the *jogī* Acintanātha of stone feet of Gorakṣa for worship (Regmi, 1966, 31). The *Amaraughaprabodha*, a Sanskrit work on *yoga*, is likely to date to the 14th century and was attributed to Gorakṣa. From the 15th century onward, references to Gorakṣa and texts attributed to him become much more common.

Other Nāths

Below is a list of well-known Nāths other than Matsyendra and Gorakṣa. A wealth of conflicting and overlapping legends surrounds all of them; only their most important and best-attested characteristics are given here.

Jālandharnāth

(or Jālandhari, Jālandharipā, Hāḍipā, Jvāendra, Bālnāth, Bālgundāi). Usually said to be from Jalandhar in Punjab and to have travelled to Bengal, Jālandharnāth is mentioned in texts dating back to at least the 13th century. He is often said to have been Matsyendra's disciple and the *guru* of both Kānhapā and Gopīcand. In some important Nāth centers, such as those at Jogi Tilla in Punjab and Jodhpur in Rajasthan, he was the pre-eminent Nāth until as recently as two hundred years ago.

Kānhapā

(or Kānhu, Kaṇerī, Kṛṣṇapāda, Kaṇaripā, Kāniph, Kānanipā). Old Bengali songs by this *siddha*, in which he calls himself a → Kāpālīka, date to approximately the 10th century, and he is usually said to have been from the Bengal region. In the *Goraṅṣavijaya*, which was composed in the early 15th century, he accompanies Gorakṣa, but in later times, he is associated with Jālandharnāth and said to be his disciple. Their cult is often distinguished from that of Gorakṣa, and their *panth* (path) is not included in the twelvefold schema.

Cauraṅgī

(or Sāraṅgadhara, Pūraṅ Bhagat). The son of King Devapāla of Bengal, Cauraṅgī's father punished him by cutting off his arms and legs and abandoning him in a forest. He was rescued by Matsyendra, who taught him *yoga*, using which he was able to make his limbs grow back. As Pūraṅ Bhagat his story became very popular in Punjab. His principal shrine is at Sialkot, now in Pakistan.

Carpat

Renowned for his expertise in alchemy, Carpat is said to have lived in the Chamba region of the Himalayas. In the Hindi verses attributed to him he espouses the doctrines of the *avadhūta* (see below), shunning the observances and outward appearance of the Nāth *yogī*.

Bhartṛhari

King of Ujjain before renouncing the throne to become a *yogī*. The Nāth → Bhartṛhari is often identified with the poet and grammarian of the same name. He is variously said to have been a disciple of either Gorakṣa or Jālandhara.

Gopīcand

(or Gopīcandra, Govindacandra). The son of Queen Mayanāmatī of Bengal, Gopīcand's *guru* is usually said to have been Jālandharnāth.

Ratannāth

Famous as both a Nāth and a Sufi (by the name of Ḥājji Ratan), Ratannāth lived in the 13th century or earlier. His cult flourished across the north of the subcontinent, in particular in Punjab and Nepal. He was the *guru* of Gūgā Pīr (see → Rajasthan), the subject of a cycle of legends from the Punjab and Rajasthan.

Dharamnāth

In the 15th century, Dharamnāth settled at Dhinodhar in Kacch, where he founded a Nāth monastery, which remained important into the 20th century. He is said to have desiccated the region as the result of his austerities.

Mastnāth

The founder of the important Nāth monastery at Asthal Bohar in Haryana, Mastnāth lived in the 18th century.

Some of the above Nāths, in particular Gopīcand, Bhartṛhari, and Cauraṅgī (as Pūraṅ Bhagat), are the subjects of songs performed by wandering → bards. In addition there are popular song cycles about Gūgā Pīr, Hir and Rāñjha, and Rāñi Pīngalā, in whose narratives Nāths figure or whose protagonists become Nāth *yogīs*. The dominant themes of these cycles are royalty, renunciation, and romance.

Localized Nāth Traditions

Prior to the preliminary organization of Nāth ascetics into an order in the 16th to 17th centuries, their forerunners comprised various disparate lineages and localized traditions. These different origins continue to influence regional Nāth traditions.

The South

The majority of the early textual and epigraphic references to Matsyendra and Gorakṣa are from the Deccan and elsewhere in peninsular India; the others are from eastern India. Travellers' reports of *yogīs* contemporaneous with the earliest references to Gorakṣa are almost all from the Malabar Coast (e.g. Husain, 1953, 164; Rockhill, 1915, 450–451). The earliest iconographic representations of Nāth-type *yogīs* are those found at Panhalekaji in the Konkan region, which are dated to the 13th century (Deshpande, 1986), and the 15th-century examples from Srisailam on the Deccan plateau (Shaw, 1997) and Vijayanagara (Verghese, 1995, 113, pl. 53). Contrary to Nāth hagiographical tradition, the early accounts that give details about Gorakṣa do not portray him as a celibate ascetic. In Harihara's *Ragales*, Gorakṣa is said to be married (the *Revaṇasiddheśvara Ragale* describes him as living in Kolhapur with two wives). In the *Matsyendrasaṃhitā*, he is a

king. More than a century later, in Nepal, the Itum Bahal Inscription mentions a *gorakhātmaja*, “a [blood] descendant of Gorakh.” Although the earliest traditions maintain that Matsyendra founded both celibate and noncelibate lineages, the latter appear to have been more prominent. Early travellers’ descriptions of *yogīs* often note that they are married. The Chinese traveller Mahuan visited Cochin in 1415, where he saw married *yogīs* (Rockhill, 1915, 450–451). The “King of the Ioghes” from the west coast described by Varthema in 1505/1506 had a wife and children, although included among his entourage were what sound very much like celibate ascetics (Badger, 1863, 111–112).

The southern provenance of the early *yogīs* and their being married tallies with the doctrines and provenance of the earliest texts associated with the Nāths and their Paścimāmnāya Śaiva forebears. A. Sanderson (2011, 44–45) locates the writing of the first Paścimāmnāya texts in modern Maharashtra, from where manuscripts spread to Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Kashmir, east India, and the Kathmandu Valley. The sacred sites taught in the *Kubjikāmata* and other early Paścimāmnāya works “are located in various parts of the subcontinent with eastern India and the Deccan strongly represented. The Far South, the upper Ganges valley, the Panjab, Kashmir and the North-West are absent” (Sanderson, 2011, 77). The texts associated with the early Nāth tradition, in particular the *Kaulajñānanirṇaya* and *Matsyendrasaṃhitā*, both of which are ascribed to Matsyendra, teach a wide range of arcane tantric practices, including rites involving sexual intercourse. As well as their not being celibate, in early reports *yogīs* are said to possess a variety of tantric *siddhis* and to have a disregard for the norms of Brahmanical orthodoxy. The *yogī* donee in the Kalleśvara Inscription of 1279 is said to be an adept in a variety of magical tantric arts. A Persian work called the *Nizāmī Dakanī* written near Bidar in northeast Karnataka in 1430–1435 describes a Jogī called Aghornāth who boasts of his powers of alchemy, shape shifting, and entering others’ bodies, and he says that all Jogis consume wine and meat (Digby, 2004, 336–339).

The earliest texts on Haṭha Yoga associated with the Nāths, the *Vivekamārtaṇḍa* and (*)*Gorakṣaśataka*, both of which are ascribed to Gorakṣa, are likely to originate from Maharashtra and date to the 13th century. While there is nothing specific in the texts to locate them, they

have much in common with the teachings found in → Jñāndev’s Old Marathi commentary on the → *Bhagavadgītā*. This text, which was composed in 1290 and is popularly known as the *Jñāneśvari*, combines yogic teachings (ascribed to Gorakṣa) with vedantic discourse (ascribed to preceptors whose names have the suffix *-nāth*) in a similar fashion to the *Vivekamārtaṇḍa* and (*)*Gorakṣaśataka*.

In Karnataka, on a hill on the outskirts of Mangalore on the Malabar coast, we find what may be the oldest Nāth monastery still in use. The Kadri *maṭha* sits on a hill above the temple of Mañjunāth, which houses three beautiful Buddhist bronzes (now interpreted as Hindu) from the 10th century. Kadri is sometimes identified with Kadalīdeśa, the land in which Matsyendra is said in legend to have been ensnared in the ways of wine, women, and song before being rescued by his disciple, Gorakṣa. The first reference to Nāths at Kadri is in a Tulu Inscription dated 1475 (Bouiller, 2008, 96). It describes one Candranātha Oḍeya as the “King of Kadri.” Subsequent descriptions of the head of the *maṭha* call him the “King of the Yogīs,” and the Nāth head of the Kadri monastery is still known (in Hindi) as the *rājā yogī*. An inscription dated 1490 associates Kadri with the worship of Gorakhnātha (Bhatt, 1975, 294).

In 1505/1506 the Italian traveller Varthema reported how the “King of the Ioghe,” enjoying the protection of the Vijayanagar Empire, did indeed live like a powerful king. He ruled over “about thirty thousand people”; he and his people were “considered to be saints”; every three or four years he would go on “a pilgrimage... with three or four thousand of his people, and with his wife and children” as well as “four or five coursers, and civet-cats, apes, parrots, leopards, and falcons”; and he would wear a goat skin and travel “through the whole of India” (Badger, 1863, 111–112). His troop undertook various austerities, and some also carried weapons as well as items that became Nāth emblems, such as earrings and horns.

But when Pietro della Valle visited Kadri in 1624, the then king of the Yogīs told him “that formerly he had Horses, Elephants, Palanchinos and a great equipage and power before *Venkatāpa Naieka* took away all from him, so that now he had very little left” (Grey, 1892, 351). Della Valle notes that the Yogīs do not have wives (Grey, 1892, 349–350). The depredations the king of the Yogīs suffered at the hands of Venkātappa Nāyaka

were caused by the demise of the Vijayanagar Empire, but the reasons for his adoption of celibacy are unclear. The legend of the founding of the Nāth *maṭha* at Vittal, approximately 20 km from Kadri, may, however, be illustrative of what happened at Kadri. It is said that in the 17th century a troop of celibate Yogīs under the leadership of Meharnāth came from the north and so impressed the local king with their magical powers that he gave them the territory of Vittal. To this day, the head of the Vittal *maṭha* is known as the *rājguru*, and he occasionally functions as an officiant at Kadri (Bouillier, 2008, 130). It seems likely that the northern ascetic Nāth Sampradāya also annexed Kadri in the 17th century as part of its claim to pan-Indian status. From the time of the *maṭha*'s earliest records (1860), the *rājā yogī* at Kadri has come from northwest India. The current incumbent, like his predecessors, speaks no Kannada and has very little to do with the large and prosperous local householder Yogī caste (to their displeasure). He is supported by devotees from Rajasthan, in particular wealthy Marwari businessmen who have taken up residency in Karnataka.

Further information on the association of the Kadri *maṭha* with Yogīs of the north is likely to be found in the *Kadalīmañjunāthamāhātmya*, whose oldest manuscript was copied in 1730 CE (Nagaraju, n.d., 73) and whose 12th chapter describes how the illustrious northern goddess Vindhyaśinī settled in Mangalore as Maṅgalādevī (Nagaraju, n.d., 71).

Today there are just eight other Nāth *maṭhas* in Karnataka, one in Andhra Pradesh, and none in Kerala or Tamil Nadu, but there are large numbers of householder Nāths (who call themselves *yogīs*) in all the southern states.

The East

As noted above, our earliest mention of Gorakṣa, in the early 13th-century *Amṛtakanīkodyotanibandha*, is likely to be from the region now known as Bengal. The *siddha* Kānhapā, who probably lived in the 10th century and is associated with Jālandharnāth, also came from that area. R. Eaton (1993, 77) has noted how from the 13th century onward, the region comprising northern Bengal and Assam was renowned as “a fabulous and mysterious place inhabited by expert practitioners of the occult, of *yoga*, and of magic.” Two Maithili works bear witness to the existence of the *siddha* tradition in the region, the early 14th-

century *Varṇaratnākara* and early 15th-century *Gorakṣavijaya*. As noted below, a Nāth *yogī* mentioned in a 15th-century inscription from Kathmandu is said to have come from Gauḍadeśa, and Nāth *yogīs* feature in the 16th-century *Sekāśubhodaya*, a Sanskrit work from the east.

However, despite these indications, there is no evidence of the ascetic Nāth Sampradāya flourishing in Bengal until the 18th century (Bandyopadhyay, 1992, 34–36), and even then they remained a minority. Nāth *yogīs* do not appear in B. Solvyns's encyclopedic etchings of the Hindu castes and sects of Bengal in the late 18th century (Hardgrave, 2004, 314–330). In Risley's *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, ascetic Nāth *yogīs* are hardly mentioned. Today, of about five hundred registered Nāth *āśrams* in India, seven are in Bengal. Meanwhile persons belonging to the householder Yogī/Jugicastes are numerous in the region (392,000 in the 1921 census).

Nepal

The earliest evidence of Nāths in Nepal is an inscription dated 1391 found in the Gorakhnath cave in Pharping, which records the building by the *yogī* Acintanātha of stone feet of Gorakṣa for worship (Regmi, 1966, 31). The first evidence of the cult of Matsyendra (which was distinct from that of Gorakṣa) dates to the same period (Locke, 1980, 432–433). A copperplate inscription in the Kāṣṭhamaṇḍapa Temple in Kathmandu's Durbar Square dated 1455 may be the earliest evidence of an order of Nāth *yogī* ascetics. It records the purchase of land by the *yogī* Caitanyanātha, from Gauḍadeśa, for *avadhūtakas*. The word *avadhūta* means one who has “cast off” *samsāra* and is, to this day, used exclusively to refer to ascetics. However, inscriptions from the same period suggest that the *yogīs* in the Kathmandu Valley were householders who practiced tantric rites (Bouillier, 1986, 130); it may be that they patronized ascetics of all orders.

The earliest clear-cut evidence of specifically Nāth ascetics in Nepal dates to the 17th century, when the 12 Yogī *panths* are first mentioned in the region (Unbescheid, 1980, 175–177, 197; Locke, 1980, 436). A wealth of 18th-century legends and inscriptions associates Nāth ascetics with the Gorkhā (Gurkha) conquest of the west of the country (Bouillier, 1986, 128).

Today there are ten Nāth *yogī* centers in Nepal. Ascetic Nāths are greatly outnumbered by the members of the various Yogī castes.

The Northwest

With two exceptions (Yogi, 1924, 23, who says he was born on the banks of the Godāvārī, and a late *Gorakṣasahasranāmastotra*, which has him as coming from the south, namely the country of Baḍhava; White, 1996, 134, 422n82), Nāth tradition has it that Gorakṣa came from North India (usually Punjab, but also Nepal or Bengal; see, e.g., Dvivedi, 1996, 96). However, other than his being named as the progenitor of one variety of Haṭha Yoga in the *Sārngadharaṣṭhāṭhā*, which was compiled near Jaipur in 1362, the oldest mentions of him from that region date to the 15th century. Despite numerous reports of interactions between Sufis and Jogis from the 13th century onward (Digby, 1970) and Ibn Battuta's tales of *yogīs* in Delhi and near Khajuraho in 1342 (Husain, 1953, 165–166), there is no further mention of Gorakṣa himself in northwest India until the *Alakḥbānī* of 'Abd Al-Quddus Gangohi, which probably dates to 1480 (Weightman, 1992, 171–172). The legend of Gorakṣa's rescuing Matsyendra was told in Delhi in 1400 by the Sufi Shaykh Gesūdarāz, but the *yogīs'* names are not reported (Digby, 1970, 32–34).

What information we do have about the Yogī cults that were existent in the northwest in the early period suggests that they traced their lineages to Nāths other than Gorakṣa. Gesūdarāz recounts a meeting with the *yogī* Bālgundāi, which took place toward the end of the 14th century. Bālgundāi appears to identify himself with Jālandharnāth (Digby, 1970, 27–30). One of the most important Nāth *yogī* monasteries (until Partition) was that at Jogi Tilla in Punjab (see e.g. Hoyland, 1922, 113–116). Until at least the 17th century, the *yogīs* there traced their lineage to Jālandharnāth/Bālnāth, and the monastery was known as Bālnāth Ṭilla, after which time it became known as Gorakḥ Ṭilla. Jālandharnāth was also the tutelary deity of the Nāth *yogīs* who controlled the Jodhpur court in the first half of the 19th century.

The important *yogī* shrine at Dhinodhar in Kacch was established by Dharamnāth in about 1450, and his descendants held him to be the founder of the Jogī sect until the 20th century, when they began to defer to Gorakḥnāth (Postans, 1839, 269; Briggs, 1938, 116).

Details of the practices of these northwestern *yogīs* are sparse, but what information we can glean suggests that they were adepts of tantric practices. Bālgundāi offered Gesūdarāz the secrets

of alchemy and eye-black for invisibility, both archetypal tantric *siddhis*, as well as a drug for the retention of semen, safety from enemies, and the power of making one's bed move by itself (Digby, 1970, 22–23). Dharamnāth is renowned for having stood on his head for 12 years (Briggs, 1938, 117). Such inversions are an ancient ascetic practice, associated with the yogic retention of semen.

The teachings on *yoga* found in Nāth texts from the northwest present a distinct tradition from that found elsewhere. One particular feature is the idea of the *daśamadvāra*, the tenth door of the body through which the life force of the enlightened *yogī* is said to exit and which is only mentioned in northern works such as the *Amarauḥṣāsāna*, *Gorakḥbānī*, and *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati*.

The northern *yogīs* were celibate. The Jesuit priest Anthony Monserrate noted that at Jogi Tilla in the late 16th century there were lay members of the order in addition to the celibate *yogīs* (Hoyland, 1922, 115). The *yogī* followers of Gorakḥ described in the 16th- and 17th-century Sufi romances known as Premākhyāns are celibate ascetics (nominally at least – they are not all beyond temptation). From the late 16th century onward, there are many depictions of *yogīs* in Mughal miniatures, but none shows female *yogīs*. The same situation obtains to this day: there are almost no female Nāth ascetics (Bouillier, 2008, 68n15).

The 16th and 17th centuries saw the composition of a corpus of Hindi verses ascribed to various Nāths, in particular Gorakḥnāth. While this corpus is somewhat heterogenous, both praising and scorning typical Nāth practices such as *yoga*, alchemy, and sexual rites, it is infused with the *nirguṇa bhakti* of the → Sants that was flourishing in North India at the time. Since this period, the activities of the ascetic Nāth Sampradāya have been concentrated in the north and west of India.

The Twelve Panths

The oldest organizational principle of the Nāths is their division into 12 *panths* (paths). The first references to *yogīs* being organized thus are found in Sikh writings from the very beginning of the 17th century (*Gurū Granth Sāhib* 9.2; 34.2 [Callewaert, 1996, 939, 941]; *Vāraṇ Bhāi Gurdās* 8.13). The earliest list of the names of the 12 *panths* is found in the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* (Shea & Troyer,

1843, vol. II, 128), which was composed in the first half of the 17th century. There is a great deal of variety in the many subsequent lists of *panths*, and a parallel division of 18 *panths* is also found. Today, a list of 12 propagated by the Yogi Mahasabha is authoritative: Satyanāthī, Dharmanāthī, Rāmnāthī, Bairāg, Kapilāni, Āīpanthī, Naṭeśvarī, Gaṅganāthī, Rāval, Pāvpanthī, Mannāthī, and Pāgalpanthī (Bouillier, 2008, 32–35; see also Briggs, 1938, 75; Dvivedi, 1996, 11–15).

Of the 12 *panths*, the Āīpanth is perhaps the oldest. Its current headquarters are located at the Asthal Bohar Nāth *maṭha* in Haryana. The Āīpanth is mentioned in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* (28.3 [Callewaert, 1996, 6]), wherein it refers to the highest order of *yogīs*. Members of this *panth* say that *āī* means *māī* (mother, goddess), and that *-āī* was the nominal suffix used by all members of the *panth* until it was changed to *-nāth* by Mastnāth (Briggs, 1938, 67–68). The tantric *yogī* encountered by Gesūdarāz in the 14th century was called Bālgundāī (Digby, 1970, 22). A link with earlier Kaula *yoginī* cults is suggested by the wives of Matsyendranāth's six noncelibate sons and deities worshipped in early Deccan *yoginī* cults having names ending in *-āī* (*TĀ.* 29.29–42; Sanderson, 2011, 76).

Not all Nāths are included in the *panth* rubric. In particular, the followers of Kānhapā, whose practices are said to be of the Kāpālīka tradition, are excluded from the system (Briggs, 1938, 69; Dvivedi, 1996, 80).

Appearance

Today the appearance of Nāth householders is, on the whole, little different from that of other Indian householders, bar the diminishing number who wear ochre clothes, turbans, and, in some cases, hooped earrings through the cartilage of their ears. Nāth ascetics also dress similarly to other North Indian Śaiva ascetics. Evidence from miniature paintings dating to the 16th century onward shows that in the past their apparel was more distinctive. They often wore long cloaks, either patchwork or made from a single piece of cloth. Peculiar headgear was common, with both pointed and bowler-style hats depicted. Many Nāth ascetics are portrayed wearing necklaces from which hang multicoloured strips of cloth. These signified high status in the sect (Hoyland, 1922, 114). They are also shown wearing and using

yogapaṭṭas, bands for supporting the body while sitting cross-legged. These insignia are now found very rarely, if at all.

Two aspects of the appearance of today's Nāths, both householders and ascetics, are particularly emblematic of their identity: the hooped earrings worn through the cartilage of both ears, and the *śīmgī*, the small horn worn on a thread around the neck. These will now be examined in detail.

Earrings

The wearing of hooped earrings in slits in the cartilage of the ears cut by a dagger at the time of initiation is peculiar to the Nāths and is their most prominent distinguishing feature, on account of which they are known to non-Nāths as → Kānpḥaṭā (“split-eared”) *yogīs*, a name eschewed by the Nāths themselves, who prefer Darśanī *yogī*. The earrings can be made from a wide variety of materials, including rhinoceros horn, wood, crystal, and gold. Not all Nāth ascetics wear earrings. Those who do not wear earrings are known as Aughars (for householders in Nepal, the corresponding term is “Kunvār” – Bouillier, 1986, 146). There are many legends about the origins of the practice (see, e.g., Dvivedi, 1996, 15; Briggs, 1938, 9–10), in one of which Matsyendra is said to have been rewarded by Śiva with the boon of emulating his appearance, including the wearing of earrings. Since at least the time of the composition of the → *Mahābhārata*, the wearing of earrings in India has signified high status, both divine and secular. Textual references from the end of the 1st millennium show that → Kāpālīka ascetics wore earrings, and the depictions of Nāths at Panhalekaji and Srisailam, dating to the 13th and early 16th centuries, respectively, show them to be wearing hooped earrings. However, even among ascetics, the wearing of earrings was not the sole preserve of the Nāths or their forerunners. *Siddhas* not associated with the Nāths are often depicted wearing earrings in Tibetan iconography, and 16th-century miniatures depicting members of the Giri and Puri suborders of the Daśanāmīs *saṃnyāsīs* show them to be wearing earrings identical to those worn by Nāths in contemporaneous images.

What does set the Nāths apart from other orders is their wearing of earrings through the cartilage of their ears, which no other ascetic order has ever done. The earliest evidence for this practice dates to the late 18th century, when we find the first such depictions in miniatures. The earliest literary occurrences of the name *kānpḥaṭā*

date to the same period. The first depictions of Nāths in Jodhpur during the Nāths' period in power in the early part of the 19th century show them to be wearing earrings in the lobes of their ears, but soon after, within two decades, they are depicted as Kānphaṭās. The Nāth custom of wearing earrings in the cartilage of the ears is associated with Gorakhnāth. In some legends, he is said to have instigated the practice in order to distinguish his followers from those of Kānhapā and Jālandharnāth. After their adoption of this practice, the wearing of earrings became so closely associated with the Nāths that most other ascetic orders ceased to wear earrings of any sort.

Horns

Not all Nāth ascetics (and relatively few Nāth householders) wear earrings, but all Nāths wear the *śiṃgnād janeū*, the long black woollen thread on which a very small horn (the *śiṃgī*), a *rudrākṣa* seed, and a flat ring made of metal, wood, or bone (the *pāvitrī*) are strung. The horn, which is really more of a whistle, is blown during morning and evening worship and before eating. It can be made of a variety of materials, from gold to plastic. Horns are mentioned in the earliest descriptions of *yogīs*. Ibn Battuta wrote of the *yogīs* he encountered in 1342 that “they have a kind of horn which they blow at daybreak, at the close of the day and at nightfall” (Husain, 1953, 166). The “Ioghe” encountered by Ludovico di Varthema in 1505/1506

[a]ll generally carry a little horn at their neck; and when they go into a city they all in company sound the said little horns, and this they do when they wish alms to be given to them. (Badger, 1863, 112)

The *Sekaśubhodaya*, an early 16th-century Sanskrit work from Bengal, tells of the *yogī* Candranātha being awoken from his meditation by other *yogīs* blowing their horns.

The tiny whistles carried by today's Nāths produce a quiet, high-pitched whistle that would not be of much use in waking someone or in alerting potential alms donors. Miniatures from the 16th and 17th centuries show Nāth ascetics wearing animals' horns, probably antelopes', which are considerably larger than today's *śiṃgīs*, on short strings around their necks, without a *rudrākṣa* or *pāvitrī*.

It is not until the 19th century that Nāths are first depicted wearing their horns on long threads.

This may have been part of a process of elevating their status: the thread takes the name *janeū*, which is that of the similarly long sacred thread (→ *yajñopavīta*) worn by Brahmins, and in some 19th-century paintings is shown being worn over the shoulder like the Brahmanical *janeū*. The first depictions of the *śiṃgī*, *rudrākṣa*, and *pāvitrī* ensemble are from the early 20th century.

The *Pātradevatā*

Each of the important communal Nāth *maṭhas* of today, as well as the *jamāt*, their itinerant troop, has as its central object of worship a *pātradevatā*, a small clay pot containing elements of Nāth identity: a *śiṃgī*, a *pāvitrī*, earrings, a *rudrākṣa* rosary, and a chillum, the clay pipe used for smoking cannabis (Bouillier, 2008, 43). The *pātradevatā* is “a deity identified with Gorakh Nāth himself” (Bouillier, 2009, 142–143). Although pots have long been among the ritual paraphernalia of tantric cults associated with the Nāths (see, e.g., *MatSa.* chs. 10 and 45), the central position of the *pātra* in Nāth ritual today seems to be a relatively recent innovation. It is not mentioned in the Hindi works attributed to Gorakhnāth, but we do find some references to it in works of the 17th century such as the *Pañc Mātrā* and the Hindi verses attributed to Gopicand and Carpaṭ.

The contents of the Nāths' *pātradevatā* (which, although nominally secret, were recently revealed on film and in print by officials of the Yogi Mahasabha; Bouillier, 2008, 43) include items that have only recently become Nāth insignia, namely, the *pāvitrī* and the chillum. The Nāths are somewhat notorious for their consumption of intoxicants (a practice that the Yogi Mahasabha is trying to stamp out). Cannabis has been used in India since about the 11th century CE, but it has only been smoked from the 16th century, after the arrival of tobacco (see → intoxication). Furthermore, the use of a chillum on its own, rather than in the bowl of a hookah, appears from the many depictions of the consumption of cannabis in miniature paintings to have been a 19th-century innovation.

Ādes'

Today all Nāths, both ascetics and householders, greet one another by saying “*ādes'*,” which means “[please give me your] order.” There is no



Fig. 2: Seven Nāth yogīs, circa 17th century (© British Library – India Office Select Materials, Shelfmark J.22,15).

mention of this word in the context of *yogīs* in either Sanskrit or vernacular literature prior to the 18th century, when we find it in the *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati* (6.97–98) and in a text devoted to explaining the word, the **Ādesāpadavyākhyā*. Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit, also writing in the eighteenth century, mentions a class of ascetic called “Ādesī” (Sorley, 1966, 348–355). In early accounts of *yogīs*, they are said to call out “Gorakh, Gorakh” rather than *ādes* (*Gurū Granth Sāhib* 11.4.1 [Callewaert, 1996, 1160]; *Kabir Granthāvalī*, pad 128.7–8).

In the *Yogisampradāyāviṣṭi* (447–450), it is claimed that there is no doctrinal basis for the *yogīs*’ use of the word *ādes* and that the greeting should in fact be *ādīśa*, that is, Ādinātha/Śiva.

Nāths and Power

Various scholars have claimed that the Nāth *yogīs* have a history of being militarized – indeed, some have said that they were the first militarized Hindu order – but this results from mistakenly identify-

ing all *yogīs* as Nāths. In the many reports of skirmishes between groups of ascetics in North India between the 16th and 19th centuries, none is said to have involved Nāths, but the combatants, in particular Daśanāmī *nāgā samnyāsīs*, are often referred to as *yogīs*. On being initiated, Nāths take a vow not to bear weapons (Rose, 1911, 401), and the first overtly Nāth Sanskrit text, the *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati*, pours scorn on those who do so (6.64). On a practical level, Kānpaṭā *yogīs* cannot fight because it would be easy for their earrings to be ripped out, the consequence of which is expulsion from the order (Bouillier, personal communication, 2010).

Thus the Nāth Sampradāya did not, unlike their contemporaries the Daśanāmī *samnyāsīs* and Rāmānandīs, develop military units (→ *akhārās*), nor do they appear to have had those orders' taste for trade and banking. The militarization of the Rāmānandīs in the early 18th century was closely connected with their patronage by the Jaipur monarchy. The *samnyāsī akhārās*, however, were more mercenary, fighting for whoever they thought would benefit them most and achieving considerable influence and wealth as a result. In a handful of isolated incidents, the Nāths did briefly achieve positions of power at royal courts, but these appear to have been the result of the charisma of individual Nāths rather than a deliberate policy of the Nāth Sampradāya.

The best-known example of Nāths achieving political power was in Jodhpur in the first half of the 19th century. Maharaja Man Singh was convinced that the magical intercession of Ayas Dev Nath had won him the throne and, to the chagrin of many, including the British and his Rajput court, entrusted the running of his kingdom to Nāth ministers for the best part of his 40-year reign. He patronized Nāth scholarship, collected Nāth manuscripts, and wrote Nāth eulogies and hagiographic verses of his own. The Man Singh Pustak Prakash library in the Mehrangarh fort in Jodhpur houses much the most extensive collection of Nāth manuscripts in India, most of which date to Man Singh's reign.

Elsewhere in Rajasthan (Jaisalmer, Udaipur, and Kanauj; Bouillier, 1986, 134; Diamond, 2006), there are legends of Nāths empowering kings, often by magical means such as the gift of a sword which confers invincibility on its bearer, although it is not always clear to what extent these legends were fabricated to legitimize reigns. A similar

situation obtains in the Himalayan region. One incident, whose historicity is beyond doubt, was Bhagavantnāth's assistance of King Pṛthvī Nārāyaṇ Śāh in his quest to unify Nepal in the 18th century (Bouillier, 1991). Similar tales are told, albeit on a smaller scale, about Jumla and Caughera in Nepal, Dewalgarh in Tehri Garhwal, and Champawat in Kumaon (Bouillier, 1989, 197–200).

Places

Important Nāth *mathas* and temples include Asthal Bohar in Haryana, where Mastnāth established a monastery in the 18th century; Jwalamukhi in Himachal Pradesh, an ancient place of pilgrimage and goddess worship; Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh, whose Gorakhnāth Temple was established in the 17th century; Devi Patan, an ancient center of goddess worship also in Uttar Pradesh; Haridwar in Uttaranchal, where the headquarters the Yogi Mahasabha are now located but whose importance for the sect seems to be relatively recent; Caughera in Nepal, whose monastery was patronized by the state in the 18th to 20th centuries; and Kadri in Karnataka, which, as we have seen, has been a Nāth monastery since at least the 15th century. Among Nāth centers, which were previously important but whose influence has waned, are Dhinodhar in Kacch and the city of Jodhpur. Two important Nāth centers that date to the 16th century are now in Pakistan: Jogi Tilla in Punjab and Gorkhatri near Peshawar. Until Partition, Jogi Tilla (which has also been known as both Bālnāth Ṭilla and Gorakh Ṭilla) was generally recognized as the headquarters of the Nāths, but since then, the Gorakhnāth temples at Haridwar and Gorakhpur have vied for primacy, with the latter currently enjoying greater influence.

In addition to the above important centers, Nāth ascetics visit most of the well-known Hindu pilgrimage sites, in particular those of Śaiva or Śākta orientation. Numerous shrines and pilgrimage centres are of particular importance for Nāths, including the Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu, Amarnath Cave in Kashmir, Kapurthala in Punjab, Girnar in Gujarat, and Tryambakeshwar in Maharashtra. Two previously popular Nāth pilgrimage places are now in → Pakistan: Sialkot (the home of Pūraṇ Bhagat) and Hing Laj. The latter, which is situated in a remote part of the

akran coast in Baluchistan, was the most important of the Nāths' pilgrimage places: it was the duty of every *yogī* to visit it once.

Doctrine

The first earthly *guru* of the Nāths, Matsyendra, is said to have brought the Kaula tantric doctrine (→ Tantra) to the world (Sanderson, 1988, 681). An important early (c. 10th-cent.) text attributed to him, the *Kaulajñānanirṇaya*, teaches Kaula doctrines. The *Matsyendrasaṃhitā*, a 13th-century compendium of teachings on *yoga* and ritual attributed to him, describes its doctrine as *śāmbhava*. This South Indian variant of Śaivism derives from the eastern and western Kaula streams, but it also marks a moment in the history of *yoga* when *yoga* started to detach itself from sectarian moorings (Kiss, 2009, 97). This necessitated the elimination of sect markers such as deities, *mantras*, and metaphysics. Subsequent Nāth works on *yoga* continue this trend of antisectarianism, and it is not until the approximately 18th-century *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati*, which itself marks a moment when the Nāth Sampradāya was seeking to establish a solid sectarian identity, that a specifically Nāth metaphysics is expounded. The *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati* teaches the creation of the world from → *brahman*, through → *śakti* and the elements (→ *mahābhūtas*), to the beginnings of human life. It includes descriptions of the components of the subtle body and how they can be used in yogic practice, together with microcosmic and macrocosmic parallels between the body and the universe.

Practice

The Nāths have long been associated with a variety of practices, through which they are said to have attained *siddhis*, magical powers, and → *jīvanmukti*, liberation while living. Often they are said to achieve the latter in a body made immortal through *yoga* or alchemy. Their mastery over death, which is personified as → Yama, is a recurrent theme of their hagiography, much of which also mentions the miracles they effected by the use of their *siddhis*, such as the ability to fly or to break droughts.

Although the current religious practice of Nāths, both ascetics and householders, conforms

on the whole to the norms of Hindu devotional observances, with some Nāths even patronizing vedic rituals, they are still associated with a variety of tantric practices, in particular tantric ritual, alchemy, and *yoga*.

Tantra

The forerunners of the Nāths practiced variants of Kaula Tantrism (see → Tantra), all of which are effectively extinct today except for the Dakṣiṇāmnāya ("Southern") stream known as → Śrīvidyā, on whose practices Nāth tantric ritual is based today. The chief goddess of current Nāth *yogī* ritual Paddhatis is the same as that of Śrīvidyā: Bālāsundarī or Tripurāsundarī (Yogī Vilāsnāth, 2010). The Paddhatis describe a variety of *mantras* and → *maṇḍalas* for ritual use. The most important rite is the secret *śāṅkhaḍhāl*, in which Bālāsundarī (as Yogmāyā) is propitiated using various substances, including cannabis, which appear to be tamer versions of sexual fluids used in similar rites practiced by householder castes connected with the Nāths (Khan, 1994). The *śāṅkhaḍhāl* is a key part of Nāth *yogīs*' funeral rites (Bouillier, 1986, 155).

Alchemy

Included among the *siddhas* were several adepts of alchemy (*rasāyana*), some of whom were later coopted into the Nāth Sampradāya. The most famous was Nāgārjuna; others include Nityanāth, Carpaṭi, and Gorakṣa himself.

Alchemy is the practice most often noted in early records and accounts of Nāth *yogīs*. Marco Polo remarked on how the *yogīs* he encountered lived for two hundred years thanks to the elixirs of mercury and sulphur they ate (White, 1996, 9). In the 17th century, the emperor Aurangzeb requested mercury from the abbot of a Nāth *yogī* monastery in the Punjab (Goswamy & Grewal, 1967). To this day, a small number of Nāth *yogīs* are known for their alchemical prowess (Bouillier, 2008, 62, 109, 174).

Yoga

The Nāths have long been associated with the practice of Haṭha → Yoga, of which Gorakṣa is said

to have been the innovator. The earliest formulation of Haṭha Yoga is found in the approximately 13th-century *Dattātreya-yogaśāstra*, a text not composed in a Nāth milieu. Its techniques were used to preserve *bindu*, semen, the essence of vital power. These techniques were to a certain extent incompatible with those of the *yoga* of the Paścimāmnāya forerunners of the Nāths, such as the raising of *kuṇḍalinī* (see → Yoga) and other tantric visualizations, as well as sexual rites. The early Nāth Haṭha Yoga texts, such as the *Vivekamārtaṇḍa*, (*)*Gorakṣaśataka*, *Khecarīvidyā*, and *Haṭhapradīpikā*, overlaid onto this Haṭha Yoga their *yoga* techniques (which are classified in the *Dattātreya-yogaśāstra* and later works as *laya-yoga*). With the success of the *Haṭhapradīpikā*, this synthesis became the dominant form of Haṭha Yoga and remains so to this day.

The Nāths' reinvention of Haṭha Yoga was a continuation of the process begun in the *Matsyendrasaṃhitā*. It involved a reformation of tantric ritual, relocating it to the body of the individual *yogī* and doing away with Tantra's complex paraphernalia and transgressive rites. This is stated explicitly in these early texts. The final verse of the (*)*Gorakṣaśataka* says,

We drink the dripping liquid called *bindu*, "the drop," not wine; we eat the rejection of the objects of the five senses, not meat; we do not embrace a sweetheart but the *suṣumnā nāḍī*, her body curved like *kuśa* grass; if we must have intercourse, it takes place in a mind dissolved in the void, not in a vagina. (*GoṢat*. 101)

In the context of the practice of *khecarīmudrā*, an important Haṭha Yoga practice in which the *yogī* inserts his tongue into the cavity above the soft palate in order to drink the nectar of immortality, the *Haṭhapradīpikā* says (3.46–48),

[The *yogī*] should constantly eat the meat of the cow and drink the liquor of the gods. I reckon him to be a Kaula; the others are destroyers of the Kula. By the word "cow" the tongue is meant, because the insertion of [the tongue] at the palate is the eating of the meat of the cow, which destroys great sins. The essence that flows from the moon, brought about by the fire generated by the tongue's insertion, is the liquor of the gods. (*HP*. 3.46–48)

Although the Nāths' adoption and adaptation of Haṭha Yoga was very successful – their Haṭha Yoga became synonymous with *yoga* – the Nāths appear not to have practiced their invention very

assiduously. There have been few celebrated Nāth practitioners of Haṭha Yoga since the time of the composition of the *Haṭhapradīpikā*. No new texts on Haṭha Yoga have been composed by the Nāths, and none of the many modern schools of *yoga* is from a Nāth milieu. Meanwhile, the ascetic traditions among which the first formulations of Haṭha Yoga originated, namely, the forerunners of the Daśanāmī *saṃnyāsīs* and the Rāmānandīs, adopted the new *kuṇḍalinī*-oriented *yoga* of the Nāths and continue to write about and practice it up to the present day.

The Avadhūta

One reason for the Nāth *yogīs*' apathy toward Haṭha Yoga is that they, as much as any other ascetic order, espouse the virtues of the *avadhūta*, he who has "cast off" → *samsāra* and pours scorn on all worldly activity, including religious practice. The *avadhūta* takes to its logical conclusion *nirguṇa bhakti*, devotion to the formless divine. Rather than by engaging in complicated spiritual practice, → liberation is achieved through *sahaja-yoga* (natural *yoga*), whose only real practice (if any at all) is the repetition of the name of the divine. The *locus classicus* of the doctrine of the *avadhūta* is the *Avadhūtagītā*, a text of uncertain date said to have been composed by the god Dattātreya. This attribution has led scholars, probably mistakenly, to associate the text with the Nāth Sampradāya, but, whether or not this attribution is justified, its carefree attitude is mirrored by texts that certainly are the products of a Nāth milieu, such as the *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati* and some of the verses of the *Gorakṣbānī*. In its last two chapters, the *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati*, after teaching the doctrines outlined above, paradoxically denounces all learning and practice in a paean to the *avadhūta*.

Texts

There is a huge corpus of texts attributed to Nāths, many of which are unedited. Dvivedi (1996, 95) asserts that there are stories about Gorakṣnāth in every Indian language. The following is a summary of important texts attributed to Nāths, together with works that were not composed in a Nāth milieu but that shed light on the Nāth Sampradāya.

Several texts have been attributed to Matsyendra, including the *Kaulajñānanirṇaya*, *Akulavīratāntra*, *Matsyendrasaṃhitā*, *Candrāvalokana*, and *Yoga-viśaya*. The first three are tantric compendia; the latter two are yogic works.

A huge number of works have been attributed to Gorakṣa. They include the *Gorakṣasaṃhitā*, which is an expansion of the *Kubjikāmatatantra*, an important Paścimāmnāya Kaula work. The *Gorakṣasaṃhitā* contains no references to Gorakṣa, other than in its colophons, but its ninth chapter is about Jālandharanātha. Connected, at least in the Nāth tradition, with the *Gorakṣasaṃhitā* is the *Bhūtiprakaraṇa*, a work on alchemy also attributed to Gorakṣa. A perhaps contemporaneous work on alchemy is the *Rasaratnākara* of Nityanātha.

Of the many works on Haṭha Yoga said to have been authored by Gorakṣa, the *Vivekamārtanḍa* and (*)*Gorakṣasāta* are among the earliest. Slightly later is the *Amarauḥaprabodha*. The *Khecarīvidyā* of Ādinātha (i.e. Śiva) is another early Nāth work on Haṭha Yoga. All of these Nāth works on Haṭha Yoga were used by Svātmārāma to compile the *Haṭhapradīpikā* in the 15th century, as were other texts, including the *Yogabīja* and *Amanaskayoga*, which have recently been ascribed to Gorakṣa, despite this attribution not being found in their manuscript colophons.

Two Old Marathi works whose first recensions were composed in the 13th century are important in establishing the early history of the Nāths. The first is Jñāndev's commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā*, popularly known as the *Jñāneśvarī*, in which he says he is of the lineage of Matsyendra and Gorakṣa, and teachers of → Vedānta whose names end in -*nātha*. Among the Jñāneśvarī's teachings is a beautiful passage on *kuṇḍalinīyoga* (see Kiehnle, 2005). The other Old Marathi work is the *Līlācaritra*, an early text of the Mahānubhāv sect that makes references to Nāths. Harihara's early 13th-century Kannada *Ragales* similarly provide etic information on the Nāths, as does the *Śūnyasampādane*, a collection of tales in Kannada about the Vīraśaiva saints (→ Liṅgāyats), which was compiled over the course of the 15th century. The late 15th-century Telegu *Navanāthacaritra* of Gaurāṇa is the first work to give a list of nine Nāths corresponding to those found in later Nāth works.

We also glean information about the *yogīs* of this early period from descriptions of their interactions with Sufi saints in the latter's hagiogra-

phies (see Digby, 1970; Ernst, 2007; 2005) and from the tales of travellers to India from the 13th century onward (see the surveys in Pinch, 2006, 61–70; White, 2009, 198–217).

The early 15th-century Maithili *Gorakṣavijaya*, which is reworked in a variety of Bengali recensions from perhaps the 17th century onward, tells the story of Matsyendra's rescue from the land of women by Gorakṣa. The 16th-century *Sekasubhodaya*, a fictitious account of a Muslim Sheikh (*seka*) overcoming *yogīs* and Brahmans, is also from Bengal.

Perhaps the earliest Nāth work on Haṭha Yoga from northwest India is the *Amarauḥasāsana*, whose oldest manuscript is dated 1525 CE. The 16th and 17th centuries saw the production in the northwest of a large corpus of medieval Hindi texts attributed to Nāths, in particular Gorakhnāth. His works have been edited as the *Gorakhbāṇī* by H. Dvivedi, who also compiled a selection of Hindi works attributed to other Nāths (Dvivedi, 1978).

Many texts from the same period provide information on Nāths but were not composed by them. These include the Avadhi romances known as Premākhyāns (*Mrigāvatī*, *Padmāvat*, *Kanhāvat*, and *Madhumālatī*), the Sikh *Gurū Granth Sāhib* and the Janamsākhis (see McLeod, 1980, 66–70), and the large corpus of Hindi devotional literature not attributed to Nāths (Callewaert & de Beeck, 1991).

Texts that were products of, or are about, an organized Nāth Sampradāya date to the 18th century onward. These include the *Kadalī-mañjunāthamāhātmya* (see Nagaraju, n.d.), *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati*, *Gorakṣasiddhāntasaṃgraha*, *Siddhasiddhāntasaṃgraha*, *Navanāthabhaktisāra*, *Sudhākaracandrikā* (S. Dvivedi's early 20th-century Hindi commentary on the *Padmāvat*), and Candranāth Yogī's *Yogisaṃpradāyāviṣṭkṛti*.

The Development of the Nāth Sampradāya

Nāth hagiographical tradition has it that the great *yogī* Gorakṣanātha founded the Nāth *yogī* order perhaps one thousand years ago and disseminated his teachings through 12 *panths*. Scholars of the tradition have, on the whole (and in a manner similar to that displayed in the early historiography of Buddhism), accepted the Sampradāya's claims and viewed the history of the order after its estab-

ishment as one of steady decline, with the result that by the 20th century it shows “all the signs of a sect in decomposition” (Eliade, 1973, 302).

Historical and ethnographic data show that the reverse is more the case. Even if overall numbers of *yogīs* may have declined (and there is no way we can be sure of this), the Yogi Mahasabha, established in the early 20th century, is the first body to attempt to have overall control of the many disparate lineages of ascetic Nāths.

From the historical data given above, we may infer that the likely story of the development of the Nāth Sampradāya is as follows. Gorakṣa lived in South India, probably in the Deccan region, in the 11th or 12th century. He was a great tantric *yogī*, practicing rites that may have been those of the Śāmbhava tradition taught in the *Matsyendrasaṃhita*, a tradition that sought to free itself from the exclusivity and complexity of earlier tantric ritual. His *yoga* involved the visualization of the raising of *kuṇḍalinī* in combination with other physical practices, including sexual ones. His cult included both celibate and married *yogīs*, and he was among the latter.

At a similar period, or perhaps slightly earlier, there lived in northwest India a tantric *siddha* called Jālandharnāth whose practices were of the Kāpālika tradition and who travelled to Bengal.

There were strong ties between South India and Nepal in the 11th to 13th centuries (Michaels, 1985; Lévi, 1905, 364–365), and subsequently the cult that had developed around Gorakṣa in South India also became established in Nepal and the contiguous eastern region. Meanwhile, in the Deccan, the tantric *yoga* of Gorakṣa became less licentious as the celibate ascetic aspect of the cult began to come to the fore. The antinomian external practices of Tantra were internalized and, together with the visualizational techniques of *kuṇḍalinīyoga*, were melded with the physical practices of early Haṭha Yoga, whose original aim was the sublimation of sexual continence into liberation.

The creation of this classical Haṭha Yoga was attributed to Gorakṣa. By this time, *yogī* cults, both ascetic and householder, were flourishing all over the subcontinent. In the northwest, lineages associated with Jālandharnāth and others had come into contact with Sufis as well as other Hindu ascetics, and, in the spirit of antisectarianism prevalent at the time, there was an interchange of soteriological techniques and aspects of ascetic lifestyle. This produced a North Indian ascetic

archetype that survives to this day, with the result that members of the main North Indian ascetic orders, including the Nāths, are almost identical in lifestyle and appearance.

By the 16th century, the *yogī* orders of the Gangetic Plain held Gorakṣa to be their tutelary deity, as evinced by the Sufi romances of the period known as Premākhyāns. The ascetic *yogī* tradition was separate from the householder *yogī* cults that continued to flourish in their early heartlands of Karnataka, Bengal, and Nepal and which spread to Rajasthan.

At the same time, in a process whose causes are still open to debate, but which was enabled by the “Pax Mughalia” and precipitated by the Mughal Empire’s decline, religious identities in northern India began to solidify (O’Hanlon & Washbrook, 2011). The details of this transition are hard to identify – not least because Indian sects like to present their history as ancient – but it was in the 16th to 17th centuries that the four main ascetic orders of North India (Nāths, Daśanāmī *saṃnyāsīs*, Rāmānandīs, and Udāsīs) acquired their corporate identities. By 1600 the Nāth *yogīs* were said to comprise 12 *panths*, all of whose headquarters were in North India.

A feature of the legitimization of the three biggest ascetic orders (those other than the more localized Punjab-based Udāsīs) was a claim to pan-Indian status, which involved making ties with monasteries in the south. In the case of the Nāth *yogīs*, this resulted in the annexation of the Kadri *maṭha*. In the early 16th century, when the head of the Kadri *maṭha* in Karnataka, known as the king of the *yogīs*, ruled over 30 thousand subjects, this would have proven difficult, but, as we have seen, little more than a hundred years later, the incumbent was in much reduced circumstances. Further research may reveal more details of this annexation; at the moment, we can only surmise that initially compromises were made on both sides. The king of the *yogīs* was allowed to keep his unique title and granted sovereignty over all *yogīs* in the south, but he was no longer allowed to cross the Narmadā. Today the king of the *yogīs* is chosen from among members of the northern branches of the order and pays scant attention to his supposed confinement in the south (Bouillier, 2008, 130).

This annexation did not result in the southern *yogīs* assimilating to the ways of the northern ascetic *yogīs*. To this day, there are very few Nāth *yogīs* resident in the south, and the northern ascetics

are quite distinct from the southern householders. A continuing bone of contention is the southerners' reverence for Dattātreyā, who – as the tutelary deity of the Jūnā *akhārā*, the foremost division of the northern Nāth *yogīs*' rivals, the Daśanāmī *saṃnyāsīs* – has no place in their pantheon.

The 17th to 19th centuries saw further consolidation of the ascetic Nāth Sampradāya. Gorakṣa came to be the chief deity of almost all of the many *panths*, eventually supplanting Jālandhara in Rajasthan and Punjab. Some of the *panths* were originally Śākta and Vaiṣṇava, but a Śaiva orientation became predominant. The composition of the *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati* in the early 18th century was the first textual legitimization of the Nāth Sampradāya. During the late 18th century, Gorakṣa's position was further reinforced by all the *panths* who recognized him as the leader of the order starting to wear their earrings through the cartilage of their ears, rather than the lobes. Subsequently the notion that Gorakṣa is the supreme being – an idea that is occasionally found in earlier sources – became accepted, with the result that he is now held to be identical with Śiva. The final consolidation of the order occurred in 1906 with the establishment of the Yogi Mahasabha, the first organization to attempt to oversee the Nāth Sampradāya as a whole.

The Nāth ascetics' existence as a pan-Indian *sampradāya* has given them more prominence in Nāth historiography than their disparate lay counterparts. In interactions between the two, the ascetics are known to emphasize their superiority in spiritual matters, not to mention their subordinating householder Nāths by claiming that the latter are the descendants of fallen ascetics. It is quite possible that the householder Nāths are in fact heirs of the oldest Nāth traditions. Thus, in Karnataka, Nepal, and Bengal, where *jogī* traditions have existed since the Nāths' beginnings, there has never been a strong ascetic Nāth presence, but to this day there are well-established Yogī castes. Furthermore, some Yogī castes, such as those in Rajasthan, have preserved tantric rites that are now found in the ascetic order in sanitized forms (and this may hold true for other Yogī castes, most of whom have not been studied by ethnographers).

Afterword

Irrespective of when Nāth ascetics were organized into a formal *sampradāya*, Nāth ascetic and householder lineages have had a profound influence on Indian religious culture over the last thousand years. They are the heirs to the 1st-millennium traditions of *siddhas* and *vidyādharas* (wizards). The ascent of *kuṇḍalinī* through the *cakras* aligned along the spine, which was first taught by forerunners of the Nāths, has become the accepted blueprint for the workings of the subtle body and the most widespread metaphor for mystical experience. The physical techniques for raising *kuṇḍalinī* were synthesized by the Nāths and became synonymous with *yoga*. The wonder-working *yogī* is a figure to be found in a broad range of religious literature, and it is often the Nāth *yogī* who is being invoked. The Nāths' disdain for caste hierarchy and sectarianism allowed them to mix freely and exchange ideas with other open-minded religious specialists, such as Sufis and *nirguṇa bhaktas*, while their widely accepted claims to supernatural power meant that they had to be confronted by other religious traditions, confrontations often given literary form in mythological disputations between Gorakhnāth and the tutelary deities or founders of those orders, such as Dattātreyā or → Kabīr. To this day, the Nāth *yogīs* are esteemed by other ascetic orders as masters of the magical arts of Tantra, and both ascetic and householder Nāths are credited with a variety of supernatural powers, notably that of exorcism.

In this *kaliyuga* (see → cosmic cycles), all religious institutions in India are thought to be in a state of decline. But many Nāth castes are thriving, having raised their status through Sanskritization, and while there are several Nāth monasteries that have seen better days, new ones continue to be established, and others are adapting to the constantly evolving Indian religious landscape and flourishing as a result. A case in point is the Gorakhnāth Temple in Gorakhpur, which has a vast and well-maintained campus and whose recent heads have been influential political leaders.

Secondary Literature on the Nāth Sampradāya

The first explication of the religious practices of the Nāths was by S. Dasgupta (1946). This was

expanded upon by M. Eliade (1958). H. Divivedi, drawing on a broad range of textual sources and ethnography, wrote a thorough history of the Sampradāya and its practices (1996). D.G. White (1996) surveyed the place of alchemy in Nāth practice. C. Kiss (2009) has given a detailed analysis of the doctrines associated with Matsyendra.

The first comprehensive ethnography of the Nāths was by G.W. Briggs (1938). G. Unbescheid gave a more nuanced and localized account of the Nāths in Nepal (1980). A. Gold and D. Gold have produced a number of studies of Nāth householders in Rajasthan. Over the last 25 years, V. Bouillier has produced a wealth of ethnography on Nāth householders and ascetics in Nepal, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Karnataka, and she gives the first coherent overview of the Sampradāya in her landmark 2008 monograph, which reveals many key features of the Nāths hitherto not reported, in particular the Kadri pilgrimage.

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