

GOṚAKHNĀTH AND THE KĀNPHATA YOGĪS

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CHAPTER ONE

GORAKHNĀTHĪS

THE followers of Gorakhnāth are known as *Yogī*, as *Gorakhnāthī*, and as *Darṣanī*, but most distinctively as *Kānphaṭa*. The first of these names refers to their traditional practice of the *Haṭha Yoga*, the second to the name of their reputed founder, the third to the huge ear-rings which are one of their distinctive marks, and the fourth to their unique practice of having the cartilage of their ears split for the insertion of the ear-rings. In the Panjab, in the Himālayas, in Bombay, and elsewhere they are often called *Nātha*, which is a general term meaning 'master.' Women of the sect are similarly called *Nāthmī*. In Western India they are generally known as *Dharamnāthī* (or *Dhoramnāthī*), after a famous disciple of Gorakhnāth, by that name. In other parts of India the names *Kānphaṭa* and *Gorakhnāthī* are commonly used.

It is said that the practice of splitting the ears originated with Gorakhnāth,¹ and that the designation *Kānphaṭa* (literally, 'Split-eared') was a term of disrespect applied to these *Yogīs* by *Musalmāns*.¹

The word *Yogī* is a general descriptive term, applied to many who do not belong to the *Kānphaṭas*. It 'has many shades of meaning, from that of saint to that of sorcerer or charlatan.'² It is also a general term for ascetics, particularly

¹ *IA*, vol. VII, p. 299.

² *BRI*, p. 215; *RTCCP*, vol. III; *BHCS*, pp. 319 ff., 402; *Wī*, p. 217.

The following quotation is from *RTCP*, vol. II, p. 389. In the Panjab the term *Yogī* is used to cover a wider group, 'that miscellaneous assortment of low caste *faqīrs* and fortune-tellers, both Hindu and *Musalmān*, but chiefly *Musalmān*, who are commonly known as

Rings are of two general shapes, flat and cylindrical; the former called *darṣan*, the latter *kuṇḍal*. The word 'kuṇḍal' simply means 'round.' Darṣan is a term of extreme respect. The use of the word is sometimes explained as a sign that the wearer has had a vision of the Brahman.¹ The ring is sometimes called *pāvitrī*, 'holy,' 'sacred.'

Rings are made of various substances. The rule seems to be that the initiate first wears rings of clay. A legend relates how Gorakhnāth cut holes, three inches long, in Bhartri's ears and inserted ear-rings of clay. Some Yogis continue to wear earthen rings. But, since these are easily broken, others of more durable substances are usually substituted. The element of value also enters into the use of more substantial rings.

Rhinoceros horn is a favourite substance for ear-rings. It is not easily broken. The practice goes back to an early period, for such rings are dug up, from time to time, in the oldest burial places of the sect, for example, at Ṭilla and in *old* Almora. The *mahant* (head of the monastery) at Ṭilla, in the Panjab, wore (1924) rings of rhinoceros horn covered with plates of gold. Rings of rhinoceros leather are not uncommon.²

A legend is available, explaining the use of rhinoceros horn, which accounts for the practice, not because the rings are not easily broken, but for the reason that the rhinoceros is a sacred animal. The story is as follows: As a result of the great war between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kāuravas (the ancient war which is the central theme of the *Mahābhārata*) the Pāṇḍavas, having slain their kinsmen, a most heinous sin, were thereby disqualified from performing the funeral rites for them. They appealed to Brahmā for absolution. In reply, the Creator commanded: 'First make the pilgrimage to Badrināth and Kedārnāth.' The Pāṇḍavas straightway set off upon the journey. Returning from the Himālayas, they reported to Brahmā and then again asked for permission to perform the funeral rites for their slain kinsmen (ancestors). Brahmā gave instructions: 'Kill a rhinoceros, make a vessel of its skin, and with that offer water to your relatives. They

¹ So explained to the author at Puri.

² The author once saw especially fine ones at Gorakh Bansuri, Calcutta.

will receive the oblation and then will be able to proceed to Paradise.' So the Pāṇḍavas slew a rhinoceros, made a vessel of its skin and from it poured out water to their kinsmen. The *pinda* was then offered (i.e. the funeral rites were performed) and the slain relatives attained Paradise. Since that time the rhinoceros has been considered a sacred animal, and that is why the Gorakhnāthis make their ear-rings from its horn.¹

Thin gold discs are sometimes seen. The *pir* (abbot) and some important Yogīs of Dhinodhar, in Kacch, wear heavy rings of gold, darṣan-shaped, inlaid with precious and semi-precious stones. A mahant from Delhi, in 1924, wore rings of crystal with inlay of gold and precious stones. Other substances used are copper,² stag's and antelope's horn, ivory, agate, jade, glass (white and coloured) and wood. In Mewār many Kānphaṭas use rings of conch shell. The conch is their battle trumpet.³

The wearing of the ear-rings is of great importance. If, by accident, one is broken, a model in cloth, or the *siṅgnād*, must be substituted before the Yogī may partake of food, or perform his religious duties.⁴ Or, he must bathe and procure another before he eats with his fellows or engages in conversation.

A Yogī must protect himself from having his rings torn out. In the old days he, whose ears had been mutilated, did not survive; he either died outright or was buried alive.⁵ It is claimed in Kumaon that the practice still holds (1924).

¹ This story was obtained at Śrī Nagar, Garhwāl. The same reason is found to explain why followers of Guru Govind Singh use ear-rings made of the horn of the rhinoceros. There are many marks, in the lower Himālayas, showing where the Pāṇḍavas, with the dog, travelled in the course of their wanderings. At Deo Dhura may be seen great boulders said to have been thrown about in sport by the Pāṇḍavas; and near the temple of Devi there are two boulders cleft through by a fresh-looking fissure and there is a similar rift in the lower rock. The smaller, upper rock is said to be the weapon with which Bhima cleft the great boulders. Holes in the rocks are still pointed out as his finger-prints. *Himalayan Gazetteer*, vol. III, pp. 201, 202.

² The author saw fine ones at Purī in 1924.

³ *BCI*, vol. III, p. 198. ⁴ See *RTCCP*, vol. III, p. 250.

⁵ *Bombay Gazetteer*, vol. VIII, p. 155.

is suggested in the case where Gorakhnāth drew *water* from his finger when he restored Mahitā and Silā Dāi to life.¹

It was believed that Śāktas formerly ate portions of the flesh and drank the blood of the victims sacrificed at their secret orgies.² Undoubtedly there is involved here the idea of magic. The practices described under Kāmākhyā, below suggest customs which have passed there and in Orissa by less than a century.³

Bhattacharya says that Kāmārs, blacksmiths, are Śakti worshippers and that they are usually employed in slaughtering animals used in sacrifice to the bloodthirsty gods and goddesses that receive the adoration of Śāktas.⁴

In connection with the sacrifice of the rhinoceros, most Gurkhas offer libations of blood after entering its disembowelled body. On ordinary 'Śrādh' days the libation of water and milk is poured from a cup carved from its horn. Its urine is considered antiseptic, and is hung in a vessel at the principal door as a charm against ghosts, evil spirits and disease.⁵

Many objects are held sacred, or are regarded almost as fetishes, because of their associations, or through the sanctity of the substances from which they are made, or to which they are related. Ear-rings, made of earth⁶ (and of other substances); the four ancient caldrons at Dhinodhar; and numerous dhūnis, particularly those at Pāi Dhūni, Gorakhpur and Dhinodhar may serve as examples.

The Ganges, especially, and other rivers such as the Godāvāri are held sacred by them, as by all Hindus. At Deoprayāg, in the Himālayas, where the Bhāgirathī and the Alaknanda join to form the Ganges, the former, the swifter stream, is said to be sixteen annas pure and the other but fifteen annas. This is an ancient important site.

At the Śivaramāṇḍap temple the statue of a bronze horse-man, Nakaland (the coming incarnation of Viṣṇu), is worshipped; and at Dhinodhar the mount of Rāwa Pir.⁷

¹ *Temp.*, vol. I, p. 362. ² *Modern India and the Indians*, p. 64.

³ See *Modern India and the Indians*, p. 65. ⁴ *HCS*, p. 243.

⁵ Landon, *Nepāl*, vol. I, p. 292, quoting H. H. General Kaiser Sham Sher Jang Bahādar.

⁶ So reported at Tilla.

⁷ *Bombay Gazetteer*, vol. V, p. 87.

An interesting incident in tree-worship is reported in the north west. On the fifteenth and eleventh of Phāgun, Kānphaṭas, like villagers of the Panjab, worship the *āñolā* tree, or *phyllanthus emblica*. This tree is the emblic myrobolus, a representation of the fruit of which is used for the finial of Buddhist temples. Its worship is now connected with that of Śiva. Brāhmins will not take the offerings. The people circumambulate the tree from left to right, pour libations, eat the leaves and make offerings, which are taken by Kānphaṭa Yogīs.¹

Some Nāthas worship the pāduka of Gorakhnāth and of Matsyendranāth on the Śivrātri. Their carans are regularly worshipped.

Many animals are held sacred, or are in some way given special attention by Goraknāthīs. Like all Hindus, they worship the cow. There are special taboos against fish.² Of special interest to the Yogīs are the rhinoceros, the black buck, dogs and snakes.

The rhinoceros receives considerable attention. The rulers of Nepāl and others who come to look at those held in captivity for example at Calcutta, always worship them. In their worship of the sun, Yogīs wear a ring of rhinoceros horn on the second finger of the right hand; and in other forms of worship this same practice obtains. Some who do not wear the cuṭiya, use a ring of rhinoceros horn when making an oblation of water. Ear-rings of rhinoceros horn are very much prized. One explanation why men hold the rhinoceros sacred is that the animal bows its head slowly like an elephant; and the latter animal is sacred to Ganeśa, son of Śiva. Still another reason is that Śiva ordered rings of rhinoceros horn to be worn. The body and legs of the rhinoceros are offered to Gorakhnāth. It is further said that the Pāṇḍavas once killed a rhinoceros and used its skin as a vessel in which to offer water to the sun. Hence the animal is

¹ RTCP, vol. I, p. 238. The *āñolā* (sk. *āmalaka*) is an object of worship as the *Birham birich* (Brahm tree): 'He who in October eats beneath the *āñolā* tree to Heaven will surely go with all his family.' Quoted from Fallon, *Hindustani-English Dictionary*, p. 168.

² See above, p. 125.

regarded as sacred.¹ Moreover, Rām Candra had a shield of rhinoceros hide. Besides, the animal is closely associated with mud, and so rings of the horn of the animal are buried with the body of a Yogī, although rings of metal or of precious stones are not.² Kirkpatrick reported the forests on the southern slopes of Nepāl to be greatly infested with rhinoceroses.³

The black buck is revered, and its horn and skin are used by Yogīs. A story which explains this fact is as follows: King Bhartṛhari, while out hunting, came upon a herd of seventy hinds and one stag. He was unable to kill the stag; and, finally, one of the hinds asked him to kill her. But he said that as a man of the warrior caste he could not do so. She then asked the stag to receive the king's arrow. As the stag fell, he said, 'Give my feet to the thief, that he may escape with his life; my horns to the Yogī, that he may use them as his whistle (*nād*); my skin to the ascetic, that he may worship upon it; my eyes to a fair woman, that she may be called *mīrga nāinī* (having eyes like a deer); and eat my flesh thyself.' It is said that Bhartṛhari soon afterwards met Gorakhnāth who accused him of having killed one of his disciples. Bhartṛhari replied that if he had, then Gorakhnāth could restore him to life. Thereupon Gorakhnāth threw some earth upon the stag, thereby restoring him to life.⁴

Reference is made⁵ to legends in which the name and the deeds of Goraknāth are associated with serpents, especially the rain or water-controlling serpents (*nāga*) of Nepāl. Notice is taken, also of the story of the great war for the extermination of serpents (*nāga*) under the leadership of Janmegi. In the story of Gūgā, serpents and Gorakhnāth

¹ This story was told at Śrī Nagar, in the Himalayas. See above.

² The rhinoceros was declared to be sacred by Aśoka, in one of his Pillar Edicts. See Radhakumud Modkeji, *Aśoka*, p. 181. In *Manu* (3: 271, 272) the rhinoceros is one of the animals whose meat satisfies the manes for an endless time when offered at the Śrāddha. The story referred to above confirms this. It is hermits' food universally. On the Indian rhinoceros see *EB*, 13th ed., vol. II, p. 771; vol. XVI, p. 976; vol. XXIII, p. 243. The horn is a mass of hairs cemented together by cells. See also *JAOS*, vol. LI (1931), pp. 276 ff.

³ *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepāl* (1793) p. 19.

⁴ *RTCP*, vol. II, pp. 403, 404.

⁵ See chap. nine.