Where Monks Are King
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Shree Raja Mohannath Kaplani was elected a king of the nathas by a gathering of thousands of sadhus at the 1992 Khumbhamela in Nasik. His qualifications were not political, financial or even managerial. His peers sought a leader with geniune spiritual assets-one proven by years of austerity, softened by unrelenting disciplines. They chose the gentle, kindly Raja Mohan. After his election he set out 2,100 miles on foot to the Yogeshwar Mutt in the Kadri Hills of Mangalore, Karnataka State. Upon his arrival he took charge of the ancient monastery for a period of twelve years, until the next Khumbhamela at Nasik when he could be elected for an additional 12 years.

How old is this Yogeshwar Mutt? "Only God knows," offered a young swami quite seriously. Truly, no one alive today can say with full assurance when this historically important ashram was founded. As with all very ancient things, especially spiritual ones, interpretation of a deep past must draw upon speculation and myth in addition to fact. In historical fact, this is the first and central among twelve Natha temple complexes established centuries ago by Matsyendranatha, Gorakshanatha and other Natha descendants of the Adinatha Sampradaya or lineage [see sidebar].

As king, Raja Mohan has four principal responsibilities: popularization of yoga, preservation of ancient heritage, giving education and social upliftment. He is also responsible to save his religion from any external attack or damage. In addition to himself, three other kings were elected at the same meeting to take charge of mutts in Haridwar, Rohtak (near Delhi) and Gorakpur, where the re-elected head, Sri Mahant Avedyanath, is a BJP Member of Parliament.

Raja Mohan is originally from Rajasthan where he trained under his guru, Pierbhandaginatha. Raja Mohan's fifteen feet of matted locks attest to his many

years as a monk. Now 65, his slender, 5 foot-11 inch frame remains supple through the practice of hatha yoga. "He looks like someone who came out of Vedic times," commented several who met him. Those who know him also remark upon the humorous expression in his soft eyes.

There are many landmarks bringing legends to life at Yogeshwar Mutt, which is located near Mangalore on the west coast of India, halfway between Bombay and Cape Comorin. Arjuna with his brothers and Draupadi were said to have meditated here during their famed 13 years of exile. Although their Pandava Cave was handmade, its rock and earth are so moss covered and melded together through the long passage of time, it appears more like a part of the mountain from which it protrudes. Two similar caves formed in the same way are said to be where Ram and Lakshman spent long hours in meditation. Many of the great Natha sages have pilgrimaged here too.

The mutt was founded by the great saint Matsyendranatha who left his Nepalese abode to travel south on pilgrimage. He settled in Kankaldip, a region including all of South India plus part of Orissa, to found Yogeshwar Mutt and perform sadhana. His disciple, Gorakshantha, who was left behind in Nepal, became concerned. His guru was only supposed to have been gone for a short time. Thus Gorakshantha made his first pilgrimage to the South in search of Matsyendrantha. When he found him, they returned together to Nepal. The temple construction is undeniably Nepalese [evident in the photos at right], and ancient to the point of near obscurity within the slowly consuming forces of Mother Nature. Another interesting point is that everything is scaled down in size for men of much smaller stature (perhaps no more than an average height of five feet or less), leaving us today with a somewhat doll-house appearance. Additionally, the whole area for a mile in every direction is catacombed with small shrines, caves and wells, all camouflaged almost beyond recognition by the ravage of time. A palatable charm, richly scented with myth, permeates the entire atmosphere with a sweetly haunted presence of the deepest the Divine has to offer.

Turning to historical records, Raja Mohan said, "King Virupaksh of Vijaywada donated about 600 acres of land for the mutt 600 years ago. At that time it was given to the renowned Saint Jwala Nathji." However, today the mutt is left with just six acres of land as a big chunk was allocated for the deer park and Akashvani Bhawan radio station," added Swamiji. According to him, he came to know about the original 600 acres through some ancient writings which were read by experts from Mysore.

Today, construction is always underway in the compound following the kindly instruction of the Raja Mohan. Nothing of vital mystical or historical importance is being altered-only renovated. Uneven stone walkways and flooring are being replaced, toppling walls fortified and entire buildings repainted.

Just finished is a four-room guest house as efficiently beautiful as the ashram itself. And soon to be ready is a thoroughly modern kitchen complete with a gas range stove-"very first-class" as the resident swami "pandier" [cook] says. Another building, "Bharah Panth Bhawan for Sadhus," is also nearing completion. "With the coming up of these buildings, we can now accommodate a large number of guests in the mutt," Raja Mohan told Hinduism Today correspondent Rajiv Malik.

The ashram schedule for residents is the same today as it was 1,000 years ago. At 5:00am and 7:00pm, a long puja is performed in the main temple as well as in the fifteen important secondary shrines and holy spots throughout the property. This is followed by singing, satsang and upadesh with Raja Mohan. The remainder of the day is devoted to service and sadhana according to the Siddha tradition. On the property there are major shrines to Matsyendrantha, Gorakshanatha and Chourauginatha as well as the other six major nathas.

One very special place of power is the never-dying, live fire said to have been lit by Parashurama for the first and only time four yugas ago. Within its ashes are pierced and standing 23 trisulas left there in triumph by siddhars who "achieved satisfaction" in their sadhana. The Deity in the main temple is Shiva in the form of Sri Kalabhairaveshvara (Lord of Fearsome Time), and around the inside top of the sanctum are carved the images of the fifty-four major sages honored in the siddha tradition.

Each initiated swami wears the orange robes, always with a scarf head wrapping, and two black strands of cord around the neck, each with a single rudraksha bead. One cord is received when mantra initiation is given and the other at the namakarana samskara [name-giving sacrament]. Among their many disciplines, the monks excel in hatha yoga and meditation. Under the tutelage of the Raja Mohan, each becomes versed in astrology, medicine, mantra, yantra and tantra.

When asked about his future plans, Swami said, "We will keep on working for the improvement of the mutt. Our future plans include setting up a Sanskrit Pathasala [school], conducting yoga camps and running an ayurvedic dispensary for the welfare of the people. We would like to tackle the diseases through ancient herbal medicines as allopathic medicines have failed to cure a large number of ailments." Swamiji said that the mutt had organized its last yoga camp in February, 1993, which was fairly successful. "Now that our Atithi Bhawan is ready, we can organize such events in a much better way," he added.

Editor's note: Raja Mohannath's increased prominence in the Hindu world follows a trend that began after the British left India. Slowly the hundreds of thousands of Hindu swamis are becoming more active, not only in India, but all over the world, for the purpose of protecting, preserving and promoting Sanatana Dharma in its several major traditions and guru lineages.

Rajiv Malik, who assisted with this article, is a full-time journalist and editor living in New Delhi.

Sidebar: Two Ancient Natha Traditions

Natha means "Master, lord or adept," and names an ancient Himalayan tradition of Saiva-yoga mysticism, whose first historically known exponent was Nandikesvara (ca 250bce). Natha-Self-Realized adept-refers to the extraordinary ascetic masters of this school. Through their practice of siddha yoga, they have attained tremendous powers, siddhis, and are sometimes referred to as siddha yogis (accomplished or fully enlightened ones). The words of such beings naturally penetrate deeply into the psyche of their devotees, causing mystical awakenings. Like all tantrics, Nathas have refused to recognize caste distinctions in spiritual pursuits. Their satgurus initiate from the lowest to the highest, according to spiritual worthiness. The Nathas are considered the source of hatha as well as raja yoga in India.

The Natha Sampradaya (living stream of tradition) is a philosophical and yogic tradition of Saivism whose origins are unknown. This oldest of Saivite sampradayas existing today consists of two major streams: the Nandinatha and the Adinatha. The Nandinatha Sampradaya has had as exemplars Maharishi Nandinatha and his

disciples: Patanjali (author of the Yoga Sutras) and Tirumular (author of Tirumantiram). Among its representatives today are the successive siddhars of the Kailasa Paramapara, including Hinduism Today publisher Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. The Adinatha lineage's known exemplars are Maharishi Adinatha, Matsyendranatha and Gorakshanatha, who founded the well-known order of yogis to which Shree Raja Mohannath belongs. Most present-day exponents of hatha yoga follow the Hatha Yoga Pradipika by Svatmarama and come in this lineage. This school is most prominent today in North India and Nepal.

Raja Mohan explained that Gorakshanatha had 12 disciples. Of these, four were given special rights which their lineages carry on today. These four were Kaplani, Vairagya, Latashiri and Gangnathi. Raja Mohan was chosen in the line of Kaplani. He said his lineage's guru was Gorakshanatha, whose guru Matsyendranath founded hatha yoga, which is related to the sun and moon. Patanjali was from the Nandinatha Sampradaya and founded raja yoga.

Sidebar: Swami's Message

Correspondent Rajiv Malik asked Shree Raja Mohannath for his message to Hinduism Today readers:

"First of all, we must be disease-free. This can only be done through the practice of yoga, our ancient technique which integrates body, mind and intellect. It is unfortunate that yoga is our ancient science but we are now giving importance to it only because the Westerners have found it valuable.

"Most of the problems faced by people today are because we have become too selfish and egoistic. For making the world a better place, we have to overcome the barriers of selfishness and personal ambitions.

"Hindus are being discriminated against in their own country. I would say they are in a pitiable condition. I feel all human beings are the same, but it is difficult to understand why the minorities are being pampered in this country. Justice must be done to Hindus in India. Goodwill must prevail amongst all of us, and we must all

work for national integration."

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