

# Nath Cult and Ayurvedic Medicine in Uttarakhand: A Historical Study

Paper Submission: 04/07/2021, Date of Acceptance: 13/07/2021, Date of Publication: 24/07/2021

## Abstract सारांश

This research paper is focused on the Ayurvedic Practices of Nath cult and their role in the transmission of ayurvedic medicine in Uttarakhand. Ayurvedic medicine was introduced in Uttarakhand or regions of Himalaya in 1st Century A.D.<sup>1</sup> The Yogis of Nath Cult Possessed knowledge of Ayurvedic medicine they played a significant role in the transmission of Ayurveda in this region. Nath yogis use to prepare different ashes (Bhashmas) by burning metals; medicinal herbs empowered with the sacred mantras and conjured through their penances. Nath Yogis not only adopted the Ayurvedic therapeutics and pharmacopeia but also the diagnosis. Nath Yogis were very popular among the people and they commanded a remarkable respect in the society, the medicine practiced by them also become popular.

**Key words-** Kanphata, Yogis, Bhasham, Babhoot, Ayurvedic medicine.

### Introduction

The cult of Nath yogis is a definite sect within Hinduism; but the ideas and practices of the sect reach a much wider distribution than the order<sup>2</sup>. The followers of *Gorakhnath* are known as Yogi, as *Gorakhnathi* and as *Darshan*<sup>3</sup>, but most distinctively as *Kanphata*<sup>4</sup>. The first of these names refers to their traditional practice of Hatha Yoga, second to the name of their reputed founder, the third to the huge ear-rings which are one of their distinctive marks and fourth to their unique practice of having the cartilage of their ears split for the insertion of the ear-rings. In the Punjab, Himalayas, Bombay and elsewhere they are often called *Natha*<sup>5</sup>, which is a general term meaning 'Master', in other parts of India the name *Kanphata* and *Gorakhnathi* are commonly used. Women of the sect are similarly called *Nathni*<sup>6</sup>.

The timing of the origin of the sect and the origin of the tradition of the mentor (Guru) in the cult is given differently in different books. In *Hath Yoga Pradeep*, *Brahmanand* maintain *Adinath* the first in Nath yogis and all unanimously accept *Adinath* as the founder Guru of the sect<sup>7</sup>.

*Natha* yogis or *Kanphata* yogis are found everywhere in India, being as widely scattered as any of the ascetic orders. They are met with separately as mendicants and as hermits, and in groups, in the Northern Deccan, in the Central Provinces of Ganges basin, in Gujarat, in Maharashtra, in the Punjab and in the Himalayan region including Nepal<sup>8</sup>.

The distinctive marks of the cult of the *Kanphatas* are the split ears and the huge ear-rings. Rings are made of various substances<sup>9</sup>. Rhinoceros horn is a favorite substance for ear rings. It is not easily broken. The practice goes back an early period, for such rings are dug up, from time to time, in the oldest burial places of the sect for example, at *Tilla* and in old *Almora*, *Kumaoun* (*Uttarakhand*). 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 war between, the Pandavas and the Kauravas (Mahabharata), the Pandavas having killed Kauravas, their kin, committed a grave sin, and were thereby disqualified from performing the funeral rites for them. They appealed Brahma for absolution. In reply, the Creator commanded them 'first make the pilgrimage to Badrinath and Kedarnath'. The Pandavas straightway set off upon the journey. Returning from the Himalayas, they reported to Brahma and then again asked for permission to perform the funeral rites for their slain kinsmen. Brahma gave instructions to *Pandavas*- kill a rhinoceros, make a vessel of its skin, and with that offer water to your relatives. They will receive the oblation and then will be able to proceed to Paradise. Since that time the rhinoceros They will receive the oblation and then will be able to proceed to Paradise.



**Neelam Negi**

Assistant Professor,  
Dep. of History  
BGR, Campus,  
HNB, Garhwal University,  
Pauri, Uttarakhand, India

# Innovation The Research Concept

Since that time the rhinoceros has been considered a sacred animal and that is why the *Gorakhnathi* yogis make their ear-rings from its horn<sup>10</sup>.

*Nath* yogis visit the usual places of pilgrimage in all over India and Nepal. In *Uttarakhand* they frequently visit pilgrimages place such as *Haridwar, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Baijnath, Jageswar, Bhagnath, Almora and Nainital*. They visit certain shrines and temples of *Shakti, Shiva and Bhairon*. Their on shrines and monasteries are widely scattered over India<sup>11</sup>. Certain shrines of *Nathyogis* are found in Himalayan region of *Uttarakhand*, such as *Devalgarh (Shrinagar), Bhairon Garhi (Kotdwar), Almora etc.* *Nath* yogis are associated with *Himalayan* region in more than one way and their association with it is spiritual one. Images of *Gorakhnath* are found in many places both in Garhwal and Kumaon. Below Srinagar there is a cavern dedicated to *Gorakhnath* which contains his image. The figure is six inches high. Near the Dak Bungalow, in *Almora* a temple contains small images, about a foot high of *Bhairon* and *Parvati*, carved in a slab of stone and one of similar size of *Gorakhnath*. Hardwar has a number of places belonging to the *Nathyogis*<sup>12</sup>. In Panjab and in North India these yogis often act as priests for the village gods. In Himalayan region they serve as priests of the lower *Shakti Peeths, Bhairon* and native village gods<sup>13</sup>. The *Nath* yogis of *Almora* Known as *Sathnathis* and *Dharmanathis* have family and are domestic yogis. Married yogis are called *Sonyogi* and *Garhastha* in Himalayas many householders are found, and in some instances the Pujari rights at their temples are kept in the family, being handed down from father to son. The *Nath* yogis of *Garhwal* are in domestic life settled with families and worship *Bhairav* as their principal deity<sup>14</sup>.

From the above description, we have sufficient ground to believe that *Nath* cult has been popular in the societies of *Uttarakhand*, since medieval time and they have been one among the most revered people.

## Ayurvedic medicine in Uttarakhand

Prior the ascendancy of modern medicine, Ayurvedic medicine was the main healthcare system of *Uttarakhand*. Propagation of Ayurveda in *Uttarakhand* possibly with Buddhism in the first century A.D. As we know that the principal and oldest texts of the classical Indian medicine are the *Samhitas*, the corpus said to be of *Charak, Sushruta* and *Bhela*. The last one was available to the scholars in one single and incomplete manuscript and the first two are not available in their original form because they have been revised by more recent authors<sup>15</sup>. None of these three represents a first effort at systematic description of medical science; on the contrary, all the three suppose an already established tradition, to whose foundation they have not contributed. They limit themselves merely to allocating the facts of the above mentioned tradition and teaching it. This tradition claims to have links with the Ayurveda, the science of longevity, which is considered sometimes as a secondary part of the

*Atharvaveda* and sometimes as a secondary *Veda* of *Rigveda*<sup>16</sup>.

Theoretically the *Atharva Veda* consists of eight branches of Ayurveda. The texts of *Charak, Sushrut* and *Bhela*, though not observing it, are aware of this division. This division has been popular with more recent authors. *Vagbhata's Text* mentions both *Charaka* and *Sushruta*, he is obviously the most recent authors<sup>17</sup>.

The area of *Uttarakhand* has been a treasure of herbal medicine since ancient times and people have been using it traditionally. *Ayurveda* is spread in *Uttarakhand* through the knowledge of Sanskrit and the priestly class. The *Vaidyas* (Ayurvedic doctors) in most of the cases have been the *pandits* who are well versed in Sanskrit and perform the *Karmakandas* for the people, the *Yajmans*. They have their own hand written manuscripts in local dialects copied from the *Charak* or *Shushruta* *Samhita*. However, the minute observation of such manuscripts suggests that the diagnosis of the disease, the medicine prescribed, and the formulas used for its preparation in most of the cases, vary from the classical Ayurvedic texts<sup>18</sup>. The primary objective of Ayurveda was the maintenance of health rather than the treatment of disease. In Ayurveda health was not simply the absence of disease but a state attained and enjoyed only by vigorous pursuit of an elaborate, individualized programme of prophylactic measures prescribed by the Ayurvedic doctors<sup>19</sup>. The origin of Ayurvedic theory is uncertain but its material medica may have evolved from Vedic or even from prehistoric drug lore<sup>20</sup>.

Being a profession of ascetics and priests in early Vedic time, the medicine and medicos and healers became socially denigrated and the saints and ascetics adopted the profession and kept it alive. But again probably during the early centuries of the Christian era, Brahmanism assimilated the storehouse of medical knowledge into socio-religious and intellectual tradition and by the application of an orthodox veneer rendered it a *Brahmanic* science.

While looking into the history of medicine in Himalayas we see the role of wandering ascetics in the introduction, propagation and dissemination of Ayurvedic medicine in the region. Such medicinal practices probably were promoted by *Nath* yogis<sup>21</sup>. Disease and medicine in *Garhwal* and *Kumaun*, (*Uttarakhand Himalaya*) prior to modern medicine was the privileged field of *Vaidyas* and healers. The Ayurvedic medicine might have commenced in *Uttarakhand* after the knowledge of Sanskrit and presence of sacerdotal class. We have inscriptional evidences of the presence of Sanskrit in the region as early as 3<sup>rd</sup> century Vikram era<sup>22</sup>. Later on the use of Sanskrit in the area and this can be verified by the recovery of more Sanskrit inscription in the region. However, it cannot be accurately established if any *Vaidya* in the region was practicing Ayurveda so early but there might be a strong possibility of the beginning and of the transmission of the Ayurveda in

# Innovation The Research Concept

Uttarakhand in the early centuries of Christian era. Since the Himalaya has been the treasure house of medicinal plants- basic component of Ayurvedic medicine, it might have been easy for the Vaidyas to get medicine for treating the people. *Himvanta* (Himalaya) has been referred as the vital source of medicinal herbs in *Charaka Samhita* itself<sup>23</sup>.

Ancient communities of the region used to apply medicinal plants, herbs, root, fruits, seeds etc..In raw form for curing themselves. The Vaidyas might have been benefited by the rich knowledge of these communities in identifying the medicinal plants and they might have evolved their own medicinal practices based on such traditional knowledge. In such cases the Vaidyas might have not got any professional training and they would have been unaware of the classical knowledge of Ayurveda.

## Nath Cult and Ayurvedic medicine

The Himalayan region of *Uttarakhand* had been a sacred and favorite destination for Nath Yogis right from the beginning. Their presence in the area is supported by historical evidences. *Gorakhnath* is believed to have been the earliest and the most revered Nath yogi to visit the region. He came from Eastern Bengal in the last Quarter of the 11<sup>th</sup> century or prior to 1200 A.D<sup>24</sup>.

Images of *Gorakhnath* are found in many places in Himalayas region, both in *Garhwal* and *kumaon*. In *Kumaon* and *Garhwal* hills Nath cult has been associated with the various shrines of *Bhairon* (Bhairabh). Such places of worship assumed special importance due to the association and residency of Nath yogis in the past. Thus the medieval period can be considered and important time for the widespread transmission and growth of Ayurvedic tradition in *Uttarakhand*. The political stability in *Garhwal* and *kumaon* with the foundation of Parmar & Chand kingdom in state might have played a positive role in the growth of Ayurvedic tradition as we know that the Vaidys and scholars were patronized by the kings in their courts. Consequently the Ayurvedic Tradition becomes one of the major healthcare system in *Uttarakhand*<sup>25</sup>. This is proved by retrieval of manuscripts of the Vaidyas from Uttarakhand. The Sanskrit educated *Vaidyas* penned down their own Ayurvedic Manuscripts which were mainly based on *CharakSamhita*, *Sharangdhar Samhita*, *Amritsagar*. These manuscripts are written in mixed language including, Sanskrit, Urdu, Hindi and local dialects<sup>26</sup>. Such manuscripts also consisted some indigenously developed medicinal practices as regards to prescription and preparation of medicine. Nath yogis have a considerable reputation in the practice of medicine. Their methods are in part that of exorcism and in part the use of magic, of charms and of drugs.

At present Ayurveda is not only a plant or herbs based practice. Since its rise, alchemy was incorporated in Ayurveda. Alchemy is used in Ayurveda to treat chronic diseases and this alchemy is the great gift of Nath cult. As we know that *Gorakhnath* was first of all Nath yogis who came *Uttarakhand*. After *Gorakhnath*, several Nath yogis

visited this region. Many of them travel around the area and some just settled here. There are many Bhairav temples in various hill areas of *Uttarakhand*. Which were established by these Nath yogis and later these temples became inhabitation of them. Nath yogis had a deep connection with the people including the rulers of Uttarakhand. This impression of their effectiveness is visible on the medical system and the public beliefs including the cultural social beliefs of Uttarakhand. The Nath yogis have a temple in different areas of Uttarakhand and even at present worship and Jaat (local religious trip) are organized in these temples by locals.

Medical description by different Ashes (Bhasmas or Babhoot) and flora is found in Nath texts. PanditBhairavDutt gets a text named NathNighantu. In which the vegetation found in different area is mentioned<sup>27</sup>.

The tradition of the Babhoot (Ashes) and Rakhwaali of the society is given by the Nath yogis. the practice of consumption of Babhoot (Ash) was popularized by Nath yogis. Nag Bhashm, **Bang Bhashm**, etc. is mentioned in Nath Vani (Nath Texts)<sup>28</sup>. Babhoot or Bhashma (Ash) have deep connection with Ayurveda primarily, leaves, flowers, roots, and seeds are used in Ayurveda. In the early tests of Ayurveda, these five parts of the vegetation describe the treatment of diseases. But later Ayurvedic practitioner started using metallic, minerals and gems for the treatment of diseases along with flora. There are evidence of the rulers of Uttarakhand who were also followers of Nath cult. One of them is Raja Ajay Pal who was the ruler of Garhwal (Uttarakhand). He is said to be a disciple of Satya Nath. With the blessing of SatyaNath, he established the kingdom on 52 bastions of Garhwal. His relationship with Nath yogis clearly evidenced by Devalgarh (Shrinagar). Devalgarh was the pedestal of yogi Satyanath, an idol of Ajay Pal is built on the wall in Devalgarh. Ajaypal was a follower of Nath Cult. Ajay pal is addressed as Adinath in NathPanth (Cult)<sup>29</sup>.

During the time of Ajay Pal, the Nath cult has flourished in this region. After becoming followers of the rulers, the influence of Nath cult starts increase in the general public and official. Along with the rulers, the common men also respected these Nath yogis and started getting land available to them at different places. Due to which Nath yogis settled in this area.

## Aim of the study

- The purpose of this study to describe the role of Nath cult in the history of Uttarakhand and its contribution to Ayurvedic medicinal practices of this region.

## Conclusion

On the basis of above discussion, we can say Nath Panth (cult) played an important role in the transmission of Ayurveda in Uttarakhand. Nath panth has been popular in the societies of Uttarakhand, since medieval times. The tradition of Babhoot (ashes) and Rakhwali of the society is given by the Nath Panth. Alchemy is used in Ayurveda to treat

# Innovation The Research Concept

chronic diseases and this alchemy is the great gift of Nath cult. Even at present, medicinal prescriptions developed by the Nath Yogies are also practiced in the societies of Uttarakhand.

## Endnotes

1. Dabral, Shiv Prasad, *Uttarakhand ke Ke Abhilekh Evam Mudra, VeergathaPrakashan, Dugadda, Garhwal, Uttarakhand, P.-43.*
2. Briggs, G.W., 1938, *Gorakhnath and Kanphata yogis, YMCA, publication house, Calcutta, p.-x.*
3. Dwivedi, Hazari Prasad, reprint-2010, *Nath –Sampraday, Lok Bharti Publication, Allahabad, p-9.*
4. Briggs, G.W., *ibid*, p-1.
5. Dwivedi, Hazari Prasad, *Ibid*, p.-10.
6. Briggs, G.W. *ibid*.
7. Dwivedi, Hazari Prasad, *ibid*, p-1. (vkfnukFk% losZ'kkukFkUeaizFke%] rrsukFKIEiznk;% bfrUkkFk- &laiznkf;uksaonfUrA)
8. *ibid*.
9. *ibis*, p-10.
10. Briggs, G.W., *ibid*, P. -7,8.
11. *ibid*.
12. *ibid*, p. 80-82.
13. *Ibid*, p. -50-52.
14. *Ibid*, p. 47-52.
15. Yadav, Deepak, 2005, *Ayurvedkaltihās, Voll-II, chaukhambaSubhartiPrakashan, Banaras, p. 114-115.*
16. Charanvyuh (36, *Prasthanbhad*), *Mahabharata (Sabha parva)*
17. yadav Deepak, *ibid*.
18. Negi, Neelam, 2017, "Garhwal main AyurvedicChikitsaPadhyatitathaUsparAdhunikchikitsakaPrabhav" Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, HNB. Garhwal University, Srinagar Garhwal, Uttarakhand, p. 20-23.
19. Charak Samhita, Sutra Sthan, 30120, 21.
20. Saini, Anu, 'Physicians of ancient India' JFPMC, 2016 Apr- Jun; 5(2): 254-258.
21. Badthwal, Pitamber dutt, *VikaramSamvat 2003, YogPravah, Prakashanvibhag Kashi Vidyapeeth, Banaras, p. 177.*
22. Dabral, Shiv Prasad, *ibid*, p.-43.
23. filliozat, f. "The classical Doctrins of Indian Medicine," 1964, Translated by D.R. Chanana, MunsiramManoharlal oriental Book Seller and Publishers, Dehli, p. 10-1
24. Briggs, G.W.
25. Negi, Neelam, *anukriti*
26. Negi, Neelam : 'VedhyakiPadhyatiekEtihāsikAdhysyan : ChamoliJnapadkeVisheshSandharbh main' Shrinkhala (A multi-disciplinary International Journal), Vol.-4, Feb-2017, p. 38-41
27. Dutt, Bhairav, 1949, *AshtvargiySuchi, Lansdowne, p.-3.*
28. *ibid*, p.-39.
29. *ibid* p. -43.