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ACCOUNTS OF YOGIS IN ARABIC AND PERSIAN HISTORICAL AND TRAVEL TEXTS

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India has long figured in accounts of the marvelous and the fantastic. Travelers and historians for centuries have commented on the wonders of India, from the time of Alexander onward. Ascetics and austere religious figures have always been popular subjects for comment, but there was no guarantee that foreign visitors could gain any real understanding of the spiritual objectives of these Indian recluses.

Megasthenes' account of Alexander's interview with the ascetic Mandanis is a telling example of the limitations that foreigners experienced in communicating with gymnosophists or yogis, particularly through the medium of translation.

Mandanis . . . said that he commended the king because, although busied with the government of so great an empire, he was desirous of wisdom; for the king was the only philosopher in arms that he ever saw, and that it was the most useful thing in the world if those men were wise who have the power of persuading the willing, and forcing the unwilling to learn self-control; but that he might be pardoned if, conversing through three interpreters, who, with the exception of language, knew no more than the masses, he should be unable to set forth anything in his philosophy that would be useful; for that, he added, would be like expecting water to flow pure through mud!¹

Modern critics have also pointed out how European travelers especially carried with them their own baggage of Orientalist prejudice when attempting to describe their encounters with the Indian other. While historians of religion have attempted to mine travelers' accounts and historical texts for information about the religions of India, there are admittedly limitations on how far one can take this kind of material.²

¹Strabo, *Geography*, 15.I.64.

²For a brief selection of European comments on yogis, see Yule and Burnell,

Whether the traveler is a European Christian or a Middle Eastern Muslim, such sources often tell us more about the mentality of the narrator than about the subject nominally under discussion.³

These strictures on the usefulness of outsiders' reports of Indian religions, one assumes, apply equally to the accounts provided by Muslim travelers as well as Indo-Muslim rulers and their historians. Their descriptions of Indian religions often exhibit a "curious mixture of fear and admiration, and familiarity and loathing."⁴ How much can such sources tell us about the teachings of yoga in the South Asian subcontinent?⁵ Although Vedantic metaphysics may have fascinated a few Muslim philosophers, and yogic practices drew the keen interest of some Ṣūfī mystics, from an ordinary perspective the yogi himself was one of the most visible—and exotic—signs of Indian spirituality. Having undergone a ritual separation from Brahmanic society through a symbolic death, the yogi was free of the constraints of purity that restricted the social interactions of Brahmans and other high-caste Hindus with foreigners. During Turkish and Mughal rule over India, these naked ash-smearing ascetics attracted the curiosity of Muslim rulers, officials, and travelers.⁶ Their reputed magical powers were no doubt responsible for some of the attention the yogis received. A brief survey of accounts in Indo-Muslim historical texts and travel accounts shows that the Nath or Kanphata ("split-ear") yogis, in northern India generally pronounced "jogis," came to occupy an accepted if unusual position in the cosmos of Muslim South Asia. At the same time it appears that a number of powerful Muslim rulers were relatively familiar with certain yogic practices that they found useful, to an extent that parallels the textual transmission of yoga in Arabic and Persian translation in the different versions of *The Pool of Nectar*.⁷

Jogis have long had a standard place in "believe it or not" accounts of the strange and marvelous in India. One of the earliest Arabic travel accounts of India, an anonymous text written in 851 AH (sometimes attributed to a merchant named Sulaymān), has a typical portrait of the bizarre Indian ascetic, with characteristics that (like the jogi described here) are made to seem changeless:

Hobson-Jobson, pp. 461–62, s.v. "Jogee." A number of accounts of yogis by European travelers are reproduced by Schmidt, *Fakire*.

³Cole, "Mirror of the world"; Re'is, *Miroir*, pp. 92–94.

⁴Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Empiricism of the heart," p. 291.

⁵For the general problem of Muslim interpreters of Indian religion, see my articles "Situating Sufism and Yoga," "The Islamization of Yoga," "Muslim studies of Hinduism?," "Admiring the works of the ancients."

⁶See Foltz, "Travellers"; Green, "A Persian Ṣūfī," pp. 210–11; Husain, "Hindu shrines and practices".

⁷Briggs, *Gorakhnāth*; Ernst, "Islamization of Yoga."

And in the land of India there are those dedicated to wandering in the jungles and the mountains, meeting few other people, and subsisting on herbs and fruits of the jungles. They place around the penis a ring of iron, in order to prevent interaction with women. Some of them are naked, and others expose themselves to the sun, facing it with no other covering than a tiger skin. I once saw one of these men, just as I have described, and I departed. I returned after sixteen years, and I saw him in the same condition. So I marveled how his eyes were not ruined from the heat of the sun.⁸

Several themes are joined together here that will later be associated with the jogi, including solitude, vegetarian diet, unusual attitudes to sex, nakedness, and gazing at the sun.

To the extent that we find it mentioned in Muslim historical sources, yoga, like divination, was regarded as a practical subject that as such attracted the interest of Indo-Muslim kings. Since interest in yoga did not form a normal part of the portrait of the ideal Indo-Muslim king, detailed accounts of jogis only rarely figure in court histories. Nonetheless, evidence survives to indicate a long-standing connection between the courts and the jogis, who seem to have occupied a place similar to that held by astrologers and magicians. During the heyday of the Delhi Sultanate in the fourteenth century, charismatic figures from non-Brahmanical circles attained particular celebrity at court. The poet Amīr Khusraw (d. 1325) paid tribute to the supernatural powers of Indian ascetics in his lengthy accolade to the virtues of India in the third chapter of his Persian epic, *Nuh sipihr* (*The Nine Heavens*). Khusraw stressed particularly the Brahmins' skill in divination, and the jogis' breathing control.⁹ According to Jain sources, Sultan Muḥammad b. Tughluq paid special favor to the celebrated Jain scholar Jinaprabhu Suri, at his urging restoring Jain shrines and ensuring their protection. The sultan obtained a protective amulet from Suri in the form of a *yantra* diagram, and witnessed Suri's mastery over the sixty-four *yoginis* (female yogic divinities), a practice also found in *The Pool of Nectar*.¹⁰ The famous traveler Ibn Baṭṭūṭah also confirmed Muḥammad b. Tughluq's interest in jogis, and Ibn Baṭṭūṭah himself was quite intrigued with jogis and their reported miraculous powers. In an account of "yogic magic," he relates,

This group is the source of wonders, among which is that one of them remains for months without eating or drinking.

⁸Sulaymān, *Akhbār as-Sin wa-l-Hind*, §52, pp. 22–23.

⁹Amīr Khusraw, *Nuh sipihr*, pp. 192–94, trans. R. Nath & Faiyaz 'Gwaliari', in *India as seen by Amīr Khusrau*, pp. 98–99.

¹⁰Jhavery, *Comparative and critical study of Mantrasastra*, pp. 230–34.

Many of them have caves dug out for them underground. It is built over him, leaving only a hole through which air enters, and he remains there for months. I have heard that one of them remains thus for a year. I saw in the city of Mangalore a man among the Muslims who had studied with them. A platform was erected for him, and he remained on top of it without eating or drinking for a period of twenty-five days. I left him so, and I do not know how long he remained after my departure. The people say that they fashion balls that they eat for a certain number of days or months, during which period they need neither food nor drink. They tell of hidden affairs [i.e., predict the future]. The Sultan reveres them, and admits them to his presence. Some among them restrict food to vegetables, while others refrain from eating meat, and they are the majority. The obvious aspect of their condition is that they subject themselves to discipline (*riyāḍa*). They need nothing from the world and its delights. Some among them can kill a man with a mere look. The people say that if a man is killed by a look, and the chest of the corpse is split open, it is found to lack a heart. They say that his heart has been eaten. This is prevalent among women, and the woman who does that is called a hyena.¹¹

Ibn Baṭṭūṭah was astounded one day to witness a jogi levitating before the sultan in his private apartments. He was also accompanied by four jogis on his pilgrimage to Adam's Peak in Ceylon.¹² Evidently some members of the Khalji aristocracy of Malwa were interested in the longevity promised by yoga, as they are said to have lived with jogis to acquire yogic techniques and drugs used for mastering the health of the body as well as sexual practices.¹³ Knowledge of divination and access to the female spirits called *joginis* (yoginis) was considered useful by Muslim rulers on military expeditions in Gujarat in the late sixteenth century.¹⁴

It will not be surprising also to see that the Mughal emperor Akbar was keenly interested in yoga, in view of his well-known penchant for inquiry into different religions. In what is meant to be a hostile account, the courtier Badā'ūnī tells us that Akbar in 1583 constructed

¹¹Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *Voyages*, pp. 35–36.

¹²*Id.*, *Travels in Asia and Africa*, pp. 225–26, 255, 257, 259.

¹³Rizq Allāh Mushtaḳī, *Waḳī'at-i Mushtaḳī*, MS Add. 11,633, British Museum, fols. 91b–92a, cited by I.H. Siddiqui, "Resurgence of Chishtī Silsila," p. 71.

¹⁴Al-Ulughkhani, *Zafar ul Walih*, vol. 1, p. 333 (Arabic text, p. 417), and vol. 1, p. 377 (Arabic text, p. 470), where a Deccani Muslim named Ḥasan, a specialist in these arts, is called in.

buildings near Agra for feeding the poor, both Hindus and Muslims. Since many jogis flocked to the place, Abū al-Faḍl's staff built them a separate temporary abode called Jogipura ("city of jogis"). Akbar discussed with them the effects of meditation, departing the body, alchemy, and magic (referring to the latter two practices by the rhyming Arabic terms *kīmiyā*, *sīmiyā*, *rīmiyā*), and they in turn prognosticated long life for him. They recommended that he limit his indulgence in sex and consumption of meat. Badā'ūnī felt that they wielded a fatal influence over Akbar in this respect, and he further asserted that Akbar began to call his disciples *chelah* after the term used by jogis.¹⁵ Abū al-Faḍl has noticed in passing the necromantic art attributed to certain brahmins, similar to that described in chapter VII of *The Pool of Nectar*, which permitted the summoning of disembodied spirits to animate corpses for purposes of predicting the future; a divination of this kind performed nine centuries previously was held to have foretold Akbar's conquest of Kashmir in 1586.¹⁶ Badā'ūnī also drew attention to Akbar's apparent adoption of yogic mantras, possibly with purposes of control of planetary deities similar to what is described in *The Pool of Nectar*: "He began also, at midnight and early dawn, to mutter the spells, which Hindus taught him, for the purpose of subduing the sun to his wishes."¹⁷ Abū al-Faḍl himself in his survey of the empire, the *Ā'in-i Akbarī* (*The Institutes of Akbar*), says nothing about contemporary jogis, though he gives a summary of Patañjali's classical text on yoga.¹⁸

Akbar's son Jahāngīr in his memoirs reported that in 1607 he had been curious enough to seek out some jogis in their retreat at Ghorakh Hatari (variously spelled Gorkhatri or Ghorakhtari) near Peshāwar, a site previously visited by his great-grandfather Bābur in 1519; although Bābur had not been much impressed with the place, illustrated copies of his memoirs depict his encounter with the jogis there.¹⁹ Jahāngīr's visit was equally disappointing: "Such a person proved to be as rare as a phoenix or the philosopher's stone. All I saw was a herd of miserable ignoramuses, from seeing whom I got nothing but confusion of mind."²⁰

¹⁵Badā'ūnī vol. 2, pp. 324–25; trans., vol. 2, pp. 334–35.

¹⁶Abū al-Faḍl 'Allāmī, *Akbar nāma*, vol. 1, p. 507; trans., vol. 1, pp. 772–73.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 261; trans., vol. 2, p. 268.

¹⁸Abū al-Faḍl 'Allāmī, *The Ā'in-i Akbarī*, pp. 187–98.

¹⁹Bābur, *Bābur-nāma*, trans. Beveridge, p. 230, where the place is referred to as Gur-khattari; Rizvi, *A history of Sufism in India*, vol. 1, plate facing p. 369, from British Museum copy of *Bābur-nāma*. For the vocalization of the place name as Gorakh Hatari, based on Sikh sources, see Digby, "Encounters with Jogis," pp. 29–30. Briggs (*Gorakhnāth*, p. 98) calls Gorkhatri a derivation from Gorakhsetra. Thackston (*The Baburnama*, fol. 232b, p. 285) spells it Gurh Kattri. See also Husain, "Hindu shrines and practices," p. 142, n. 1.

²⁰Jahāngīr, *The Jahāngīrnāma*, trans. Thackston, p. 74; *id.*, *The Tuzuk-i-*

Jahāngīr also admitted having an unfriendly encounter with jogis. In 1613, shortly after visiting the Chishtī shrine at Ajmēr on pilgrimage, he stopped in Pushkar. Being in an iconoclastic mood, he had an idol of the boar avatar of Vishnu destroyed, and he then expelled from the town a jogi whom he suspected of deceiving people.²¹ In spite of this incident, it seems that Jahāngīr like his father was interested in maintaining contacts with leading jogis.²² A collection of revenue documents at the jogi shrine at Jakhbar in the Indian Punjab details the official patronage of this establishment by Mughal emperors over a period extending from 1581 to 1741. Like a number of other non-Muslim religious centers, this jogi shrine received land revenue through grants sanctioned by the department of charitable trusts, and this was confirmed in particular by Akbar and Jahāngīr, who seem to have had a high personal regard for the jogi leaders. It is noteworthy that the emperor Awrangzīb in 1661 addressed a personal letter to the chief jogi at the shrine, requesting alchemical medicine.²³ There are indications as well that opportunistic jogis took advantage of the Mughal administrative system, if we are to believe the charge of the English traveler John Fryer; he maintained that “Fakiers” would extort donations from the “Gentiles” (Hindus) by threatening to accuse them of blaspheming against the Prophet in the *qāḍī* courts.²⁴ The hagiographical traditions of the Nath jogis also made much of their patronage by the Delhi sultans and Mughal emperors, viewing this relationship as both edifying and profitable.²⁵

Geographical works written in Persian continued to mention jogis in passing as an unusual feature of India. Amīn b. Aḥmad Rāzī, in his florid *Haft iqlīm* (*The Seven Climes*), written in 1594, has cited from a lost earlier source an account of the wonders of India, including the always popular stories of self immolation as well as the breathing techniques of jogis.

Muḥammad Yūsuf Harawī, who was one of the competent people of his age, wrote a treatise on the wonders and rarities of the people of India. There he relates the following:

I was in one of the districts of India and heard that a jogi had

Jahāngīrī, trans. Rogers, I:102.

²¹ *Ibid.*, trans. Thackston, p. 153; trans. Rogers, I:254–55.

²² For further incidents of Jahāngīr with jogis and ascetics, see the reports in Mobad Shāh, *Dabistān*, pp. 146 (Akamath), 155 (Chatur Vapa), 162 (Sri Kant); trans. Shea and Troyer, pp. 234, 247, 255.

²³ Goswamy and Grewal, *The Mughals and the Jogis of Jakhbar*.

²⁴ John Fryer, *New account of East India and Persia* (London, 1698), p. 95, cited by Schmidt, *Fakire*, p. 164.

²⁵ Bouillier, *Ascètes et rois*, pp. 68–75, 116–18; Briggs, *Gorakhnāth*, pp. 70, 92, 94–5, 105, 144; White, “The wonders of Sri Mastnath.”

appeared who wanted to immolate himself in view of the king of that place. The king of that district passed three days in feasting and mirth, and on the fourth day at dawn, when the orb of the sun had arisen from the citadel of the orient and became fixed above the tablecloth of dust, a great crowd of the idolaters gathered. That jogi fled from impermanent existence and was suspended in imperishable nothingness, with the cloak of annihilation on his breast and the cap of renunciation on his head. He came before the king and performed the customs of reverence and the necessary salutations. Like a rosebud, his lip was sealed from speech, and in the manner of a narcissus, he kept his gaze directed at his feet as he stood. At his direction, attendants softened goat and cow manure and piled it around him until it came up to his head and shoulders. Then fire was struck on the left and right, and it began to catch fire until flames arose from all sides, and the moment became hot. At the moment when, candle-like, the flame reached to the throat of that burned one, he turned toward the king and spoke a few words. He bowed his head like a suppliant and laid his forehead on the very face of the flame, and closing his eyes, he expired. (Verse:)

His hot-headed lover put a brick beneath his head;
he burned so much that finally he put his head on
ashes.

After searching for the parts of his body for an hour, they saw nothing there except an ashen residue. (Verse:)

You are raw as long as a remnant of yourself is out
of place;
burn wholly like a candle, so you may become perfect.

Furthermore, in India there is a group of jogis who practice breath control. They carry their unremitting persistence to the point that they take but a single breath every few days, and they consider this skill the height of perfection and the greatest achievement. Among them was a jogi in Benares who had this quality, such that once Khān-i Zamān kept him buried underground for over ten days. Another time he had him spend nearly twelve days under water, like an anchor, but he experienced no harm or injury at all. Also in the region of Punjab there was a madman, freed from the trammels of

the world, who had cast the wealth of the two worlds to one side, having neither connection to the world nor inclination to worldlings. (Verse:)

From every eyelash a lily sprang up on his eye,
sewing up his vision from the bad and good of time.

For his whole life, there is a piece of land where there is a crevice, and he has wedged his left breast, which is the treasury of the jewel of the heart, into that crevice. He has restrained his hand from taking food, and he has kept his eye veiled from slumber. [The said Muḥammad Yūsuf has written], I have seen that person, and I heard from the people who were close to him that it is twenty-two years that he has followed this regime. During this time he has not stirred foot or stretched out his hand, and for nourishment he has been satisfied with the smell of food. And God is the lord of assistance!²⁶

Here the marvelous figure of the jogi burning himself alive, and performing superhuman acts of asceticism to rival the desert anchorites of early Christianity, is presented in terms derived from the highly refined esthetic of Persian poetry.

One account of yogic breath control techniques as used by Muslims found its way into a literary anthology, the *Mir'āt al-khayāl* (*Mirror of Imagination*) of Shīr Khān Lōdī, composed in 1690 in Bengal. In a digression attached to the notice of his teacher Nāzīm (d. 1657), Shīr Khān described how the latter had become not only a poet but also a geomancer, skilled in the art of using the breath for divination. This skill, he observes, is unknown to the traditions of Greece, Iraq, and Khurāsān, being instead derived from the jogis of India. His short treatise gives details on the solar and lunar breaths associated with the right and left nostrils, and how to employ them for success in battle, in combatting illness, and for predicting the future. Shīr Khān attributes the origin of this science to the teachings of Mahadev (Śiva) to his consort Parvati, but he does not appear to be aware of a strong Bengali tradition in yoga, regarding instead the jogis of Kashmir as the most accomplished. He concludes by postulating (almost as an afterthought) that it may be that the jogis also derive their teaching from Adam, since that was acknowledged by them in the Arabic work known as *The Pool of Nectar*; that still preserves the Indian character of yoga, because it is well known

²⁶Rāzī, *Haft iqlīm.*, vol. 2, pp. 509–11. This critical edition of the Persian text is considerably superior to the Tehran edition published in the 1950s.

that Adam descended from heaven in Ceylon.²⁷ Shīr Khān's oblique reference to *The Pool of Nectar* Int.3, substituting Adam for Abraham as the Islamic counterpart to a divine Indian teacher, may indicate an alternate version of the text (or possibly a slip of memory).

Another such traveler who reported on his journeys through India was Maḥmūd b. Amīr Walī Balkhī, who wrote a Persian narrative of a journey from Balkh to India and Ceylon and back, completed after seven years' travel in 1631.²⁸ Balkhī, who seems to have traveled for his own diversion, recounted visits to a number of important religious shrines in India, such as Rājā Mān Singh's temple at Mathurā, the tomb of Muḥīn al-Dīn Chishtī at Ajmēr, and the Konarak and Jagannath temples in Orissa. At the beginning of his journey, near Peshāwar, he made a side trip to the same hermitage of jogis also briefly visited by the Mughal emperors Bābur and Jahāngīr, though his visit was similarly disappointing and uninformative. Referring to the jogis as "ascetics" (*murtād*) who practice breath control, Balkhī described their lofty stone and brick retreats as sustaining a thousand followers of the principal master. Somewhat disparagingly he noted that this "erring sect" holds the greatest sign of perfection to be the ability to hold the breath for an entire day; a jogi who could attain this feat was enthroned as master of the hermitage, while the previous master was imprisoned, so that "in a few days he certainly went to hell and became the prisoner of eternal torment." It was assumed that the spirit of the deceased master would soon take another and better body to suit its state of perfection. Balkhī observed that the kings and people of that region supported the jogis' establishment with revenue. He conversed with the new master "without any semblance of enmity or prejudice," though he also claimed to have refuted him theologically with proofs of the divine unity, utterly embarrassing the jogi. Balkhī reported another jogi with enormous moustaches whose practice of wearing heavy chains won him a large following. In this case as well, the jogis are primarily interesting to the traveler as curiosities to be viewed with some disdain.

A comparable description of jogis is found in the travel narrative of Mīr 'Abd al-Laṭīf Khān Shushtarī, a Persian merchant who first came to India in 1788, eventually finding employment in the British-run govern-

²⁷Virolleaud, "Sur un épitomé." The poet Nāẓim (d. 1068/1657), though originally from Herat, lived most of his life in Islāmābād (Dhaka); he is not to be confused with his compatriot Nāẓim Harawī (d. 1082/1671), the author of a popular *mathnavī* on the theme of Yūsuf and Zulaykha (Storey, *Persian literature*, vol. 1, p. 823, n. 3). Shīr Khān Lōdī only studied briefly with Nāẓim in his youth.

²⁸Balkhī, *Baḥr al-asrār*, pp. 4–6 of Persian text, pp. 31–32 of English introduction. Cf. Storey, *Persian literature*, vol. 1, p. 375. This passage is translated in full by Husain, "Hindu shrines and practices," pp. 142–144; see also Foltz, "Travellers".

ment of Bengal and later traveling widely in north India and the Deccan for health and family reasons. His Persian memoirs, completed in 1804, contain generally favorable comments on Indian culture. His skeptical reflections on jogis testify to the widespread tales that were current about their practices. In particular, he related stories about jogis committing suicide, either by casting themselves into a furious mountain stream in the Himalayas that is lined with swords and knives, or by drenching themselves with oil and throwing themselves into bonfires.

In general, historians exaggerate much in praise of the realm of India, its ascetics (*murtādīn*), and so forth... They say that the ascetics of India practice asceticism in this manner, where there is an extremely large and powerful river that springs from the mountains of Sind, in which one encounters much water, very rough, passing over rocks and peaks, the sight of which causes overpowering fear. Near the source of that is a place, behind the mountain that looms over the river, which they call "*kund*." "*Kund*" rhymes with "*tund*" [Persian for "rough"], and it means the source of a spring. From the mountain's peak to the water's edge is an expanse filled with great trees, from the top of the mountain to the bank of the water. On those trees and rocky outcroppings they have placed knives, swords, and cutting tools. In order to attain the reward of having their spirit incarnate again in the body of a king, men cast themselves into it so that on the way their limbs are cut to pieces and they are drowned in the water.

Otherwise they burn themselves in a fire in this fashion, first asking permission of the emperor, kindling a great fire outside town, and proclaiming that such and such a person on a certain day to gain eternal reward will cast himself in the fire in a given place. And people gather at the door of his house and around it, and a great commotion occurs in the town. Coming out of his house, he dons splendid clothes and drenches his clothes and body in oil, sulphur, and red juniper gum. He puts a censer of iron or copper full of blazing flame on his bare head and casts a handful of herbs on one side of his head, and the people and his relatives inhale the sulphur and red juniper gum incense. Gradually, they form a group, singing and dancing. He eats betel with happiness and joy and goes through the streets and the market, and to every one of the spectators who formerly knew him, he gives as a portion a branch of those herbs and prays for him. They

say that his prayer is given the power of being answered. In this state, he goes out of the town and casts himself into the fire. Some stand near the fire and cut their limbs off with a knife, throwing them in one by one. Some of them stand close to the fire and cut open their bellies and pull out the liver, cutting it to pieces and putting it in the fire. Then they themselves run into the fire, and if they roll out, the others throw them back.²⁹

Both stories contain gruesome references to jogis cutting off their limbs, reflecting the initiatic symbolism of dismemberment that is characteristic of yogic scenarios such as the rope trick.³⁰

Shushtarī also told of yogic feats of breath retention, which in popular lore included jogis buried underground for centuries and then revived at a time specified on a copper plate. At this point he comments, “Although previous historians have all related this kind of story about the ascetics of India, and they are current on the lips of the people (I myself have heard much of this), still the sound intellect and firm mind utterly rejects the correctness and truth of this kind of story. . . They are pure lies and falsehood.”³¹ Despite his rejection of the immortal jogis, Shushtarī acknowledged that there are practitioners of breath control, particularly those he has seen in the Deccan, who have the power of levitation. When he interrogated one such jogi in Ḥaydarābād about the reasons for his success, he was told that behind all the legends is the practice of retention of semen as a means to perfect breath control. The jogi recommended that Shushtarī try practising breath control during sexual intercourse to prevent ejaculation, since loss of semen is the primary cause of aging. The jogi also claimed to have such control over breath as to be able to empty a cup of milk through vasicular suction. On reflection, Shushtarī decided that breath control and retention of semen should be understood in terms of Greco-Arabic medical theory, “which I saw in the *Canon* of Ibn Sina or in another book that I do not remember.” He further concluded that the yogic technique was no better than the sexual tricks of pleasure lovers, and he wished to insult his readers no further by dwelling on the matter.³²

Being a prominent part of the Indian scene, jogis were regularly described in the official gazetteers of the Mughal empire as an accepted feature of Hindu society. One such official account of jogis was contained in Sujān Rāy Bhandārī’s Persian *Khulāṣat al-tawārīkh* (*The Essence of*

²⁹Shushtarī, *Tuḥfat al-‘ālam*, pp. 349–51.

³⁰Eliade, *Yoga*, pp. 322–23, 336, 347.

³¹Shushtarī, *Tuḥfat al-‘ālam*, p. 449.

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 450–51.

Histories), completed in 1695–6. In addition to containing a comprehensive history of India and statistical descriptions of the Mughal empire’s provinces, it provided accounts of the climate, customs, and inhabitants of India. A century later, the British in India found this text so useful that they commissioned the chief Hindustani instructor at Fort William in Calcutta, Shīr ‘Alī Khān Afsūs (d. 1809), to write an Urdu translation of it entitled *Ārāyish-i maḥfil* (*The Adornment of the Assembly*). This became a standard text for officials of the East India Company studying Hindustani, and at least seven translations were made into English or French. The chapter on Indian *faqīrs* describes Sannyasis, Jogis, Beragis, Nanak Panthis, Jatis Seoras, the four ashramas, and the four castes. The section on the jogis says that they

spend their time day and night in recalling their God to memory, and, by holding in their breath (*ḥabs-i dam*) for a long time, live for hundreds of years; by reason of their strict austerities (*riyāḍat*, i.e., yoga), their earthly garment (i.e., their body) is so light, that they fly in the air and float on the water, and by the power of their actions, they can cause their souls to flee away whenever they please, assume whatever form they like, enter the body of another person, and tell all the news of the hidden world; from putting copper in ashes, they can turn it into gold, and by the power of their magic, fascinate the hearts of the whole world; they can make a sick man, on the point of death, well in one moment, and can instantaneously understand the hearts of other people, and their custom is to have no cares or acquaintances; it is true that “the jogi is no man’s friend;” and although, in magic and sorcery, alchemy and chemistry, “Sannyasis” have great skill, still the art of the jogis in these matter is more widely famous.³³

It is presumably from Persian and Urdu sources such as this that the Arabic word *faqīr* (“poor man”), originally a term for a Muslim Ṣūfī who has renounced the world, came to be current in English as “fakeer” to describe any ascetic, whether nominally considered Hindu or Muslim. By the seventeenth century, as this source indicates, the term *faqīr* was commonly in use in India to describe jogis, and Europeans quickly picked up this usage.³⁴ The account just quoted adverts to the practices

³³Afsūs, *The Araish-i-maḥfil*, trans. Court, pp. 39–40, slightly modified according to the Urdu text of *Ārāyish-i maḥfil*, p. 53. For the Persian original and the various translations, see Storey, *Persian literature*, vol. 1, pp. 454–58.

³⁴Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, pp. 347b–48a, s.v. “fakeer”; Crooke, *Things*

of breath control and yogic discipline, but it primarily shows the popular fascination with the miraculous powers and magic attributed to the jogis. Similar descriptions of jogis are found in other Mughal gazetteers, frequently in parallel with Ṣūfī orders, as in the *Chahār gulshan* or *The Four Gardens* of Rāy Chaturman (ca. 1759), which enumerates twelve pan-Islamic Ṣūfī *silsila* orders, fourteen Ṣūfī *khānwādas* (“families”) peculiar to India, and six *darshans* or schools of Indian ascetics.³⁵

The official gazetteers of the Mughal empire anticipated and probably provided a model for the later British colonial surveys that detailed different caste, craft, and religious groups in India. As I have discussed elsewhere, the British commissioned a number of Persian texts describing the religious sects and customs of India.³⁶ Another text from the early British period is the anonymous *Silsila-i jūgiyān* or *The Order of Jogis* (commissioned in 1800), an illustrated survey of jogis written in Persian, containing tiny cartoon-like miniature paintings showing the different kinds of ascetic orders. English transliterations have been added in pencil as captions to the illustrations, and the text includes an appendix with revenue statistics concerning the population of Benares. It is divided into three sections: Vaiṣṇava (with sixteen orders), Śaiva (with nineteen) and “Shaktik” (i.e., Śakti, with five main orders each having further subdivisions, oddly including both Sants and Sikhs). The word *jogi* or yogi is used in the title of this work in a generic sense to designate any organized ascetic group in India. In a specific sense, *jogi* is also the term reserved for the Nath or Kanphata (“split-ear”) jogis, here rightly included among the Śaiva orders:

The first person who was the originator of this path was Mahadeva [Śiva], and after him Gorakhnath and Machhindir-nath [Matsyendranath]; they established and made current the rules of yoga. The leaders of this sect were people who lived in ancient times with revelations and miracles, powerful ones who held the choices of life and death, old age and youth. They had the power to fly to heaven, to disappear from sight, and similar wonders and marvels. Those who may be found in our day practice the following external religious path: whenever a jogi takes a disciple, he cuts open the side of the disciple’s ear and inserts a ring of whalebone (Hindi *kachkara*) or crystal or something else of this type, because with this sign of splitting the ear (Arabic *shaqq al-udhn*), he

Indian, pp. 199–204 (quoting Barbosa, Bernier, Fryer, and Colebrooke); Eliade, *Yoga*, pp. 423–25.

³⁵Chaturman, *Chahār gulshan*, fols. 127a–141.

³⁶Ernst, “Muslim studies.”

can never again become worldly. They practice ordering of the heart, restraint of breath, and bodily discipline. Smearing their bodies with ash, they wear a hat, patchwork cloak, colorful clothes, and an iron bar (Hindi *sabhal*) on the neck. They spend their youth in servitude. Some are attendants of Bhairoṅ [Bhairava, a form of Śiva] and Hanuman, and these do not refrain from consuming meat and wine; their retreats (*kharābātiyān*) are mostly devoted to immorality and debauchery.³⁷

This too is a fairly superficial account, joining the founding mythology of the jogis to their wonder-working abilities and current rituals. The depiction of the colorful appearance and sensational reputation of the jogis is a fitting conclusion to the official attitude toward the “sect.”

Both the historical and travel accounts illustrate the difficulties that the outsider would have in gaining access to yogic teaching. There is first of all a tremendous layer of colorful legend surrounding jogis, in which they are the heroes of magical tales of the “believe it or not” variety. Then there is the possibility that the individual jogi that one meets may very well be an impostor or at best partially informed about the tradition. Beyond that is the probability that a jogi would only tell bits and pieces to outsiders, calculating what would be of interest to them or explaining in a way that would be likely to fit the interlocutor’s perspective. Finally, the Persian-educated outsider (later on, the English-educated outsider) cannot help interpreting the jogi’s explanation in terms of an entirely different cosmological system deriving from non-Indian sources. Islamic theological biases played a certain role in the attitudes of Muslim travelers towards jogis, but the yogic practice itself tended to be interpreted as a freakish achievement to be wondered at or explained scientifically. Indo-Muslim exoticism of the Mughal period would find its natural continuation in the anthropological literature of the British colonial period. Somewhat surprisingly, the most knowledgeable Muslim observers of yoga tended to be the kings, not because they were particularly interested in esoteric spirituality, but because they found the occult powers of jogis to be useful adjuncts to their political ambitions.

³⁷ Anonymous, *Silsila-i jūgiyān*, fols. 19a–20a. The Christian year 1800 is given on fol. 61a, and the revenue statistics are contained on fols. 60a–71a.

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