

Tantra

Macchandanātha: Yuganātha of Kali

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ABSTRACT

The existence of the Tāntric tradition, both mythically and historically, owes itself to the efforts of great beings and the paramparās that they set into motion. In traditional narratives of Tantra, these mythical figures are seen to be central in the contextualization and the continuity of the tradition itself. Among them, the Yuganātha stands apart due to his pre-eminence and his singular contribution in revitalizing the Tāntrika landscape, literally and figuratively, especially the Kaula-based Tāntric traditions. Several references are made in the Tāntrika scriptures to the Yuganātha, who appears in every Yuga to transmit the Kaulāgamā. In this sequence of legendary beings, Macchandanātha finds his place as the Yuganātha of Kali-yuga. The paper discusses the meaning and significance of the concept of Yuganātha, drawing references from various texts, both literal and implied. It is further established that Macchanda or Matsyendranātha is the Yuganātha of Kali, especially keeping in mind the reference to the same by Mahāmaheśvarāchārya Abhinavagupta in his magnum opus, Śrī Tantrāloka. A brief overview of his mythical origins and his contributions is also given in this paper to highlight the nature of the influence a Yuganātha has in establishing the Kaula tradition and deeply influencing other traditions.

Keywords: Macchandanātha; Matsyendranātham; Yuganātha; Kali Yuga; Kaula.

Introduction

One of the central features of Sanātana Dharma is the concept of an *avatāra*, the special incarnation of the Divine, whose advent is to perform one or many vital, specialized tasks for the greater goal of rebalancing the larger order of Dharma. This phenomenon is what is indicated in the *Gītā śloka*: “*yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir-bhavati bhārata/ abhyutthānam-adharmasya tadātmānam sṛjāmyaham/ paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām/ dharma-saṁsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yugē yugē*”¹. However, as in the case of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and perhaps the *Itihāsa* and the *Purāṇa*, the reestablishment of Dharma does not always synonymize battle. The reestablishment of dharma can also be affected by re-introducing correct knowledge, especially the knowledge that maintains and liberates all beings. From the standpoint of the Kaula Tantra tradition, such knowledge is known as Kaulajñāna.

Another aspect of this conception of divine advent is the mythification of the periodic revival of Indic knowledgeaditions. A case in point is the likes of seers like Renukācharya, who is one of the primary teachers of this age, who revived the Vīraśaiva tradition, and Lakulīśa, who did the same for Pāśupata Śaiva. In both these cases, there is an origin point, placed in ancient

history, and then in various ages, the traditions claim to have undergone stagnation and decay, and were later revived by great dārśanikās who come in every age. The Yuganāthās follow a similar pattern in the context of the Kaula tradition.

The concept of Yuganātha, echoing the deeper truth of the *Gītā śloka* mentioned above, is a testimony to this advent. The intention behind the advent is the re-establishment of Kaulajñāna or transmission of Kaulāgama. The Yuganātha becomes the vessel for this transmission, and as the name suggests, his advent happens in each yuga. This concept has been discussed in multiple important Tāntric texts like *Śrī Tantrāloka*, *Mahānayaprakāśa*, *Khacakraṇācāstotra*, and *Kaulajñānanirṇayā*. The various esoteric meanings of the terms and the sequence of the Yuganāthās have been discussed in these texts, and this paper first aims to

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establish the breadth of its meaning through an exploration of the corresponding verses.

Among the Yugaṇāthās, Macchandanaṭha is mentioned as the Yugaṇātha in this Kaliyuga. This fact, too, is established using multiple textual references. Being the Kaliyugaṇātha, the significance of Macchanda is explored, and it is established that he has attained his mythical status and a place in the Gurukrama of various traditions, owing to his “*avatāralakṣya*” of propagating the Kaulāgamā, which has entered and become integral to many Yoga and Tāntrika traditions. The paper ends with a brief summary of the persona of Macchandanaṭha, the myths surrounding him, and, in some sense, taking stock of his references across many Indic traditions, pointing to the validation of the claims that Macchanda is the Yugaṇātha of Kali.

This work is to be seen as part of a larger project in recognizing the relevance of the great Siddha, Macchandanaṭha, and exploring his teachings and contributions in shaping the enduring Tāntrika traditions of today. This work is deeply indebted to the late Dr. Mark Dyczkowski, whose kindness, wisdom, openness in conversations, and willingness to share his findings (through interviews and extended phone conversations), offered direction and inspiration when we most needed it. This project would not have been possible without his gracious support.

Reference of Yugaṇātha in Tantrāloka

The Kaulāgamā, being a secret knowledge of the kaula, is said to be revived in every age, specifically by divine intervention in the form of a siddha. In some sense, the sequence of the Siddhās in each age is already predetermined, and hence, they are seen to be beings of divine descent or avatārās. These beings are known in the tradition as Yugaṇāthās. In each age, the Kaula system was propagated by the Siddhās (Siddhakrama) who were the Yugaṇāthās of those ages².

The *Tantrāloka* gives very specific details on the Yugaṇāthās and the krama of Yugaṇāthās. *Śrī Tantrāloka* is the magnum opus of Mahāmaheśvarāchārya. Abhinavagupta, the greatest of the Kashmiri Śaivācharyas. It is the most comprehensive exegetical work, in the Trika tradition, by which he integrated the Kula, Kaula, Krama, Spanda, and Pratyabhijñā traditions all under the larger branch, called Anuttara Trika Kula. Under this structure, a lot is mentioned about the Kaula tradition and the Yugaṇāthās, through the concept of the Gurumaṇḍalakrama. Gurumaṇḍala, as a concept, refers to a circle consisting of the Gurus, who were the lineage holders, and through whom the tradition has reached a recipient. In Tāntric traditions, the worship of the Gurumaṇḍala in an order (krama) holds a very important place in daily ritual and worship. The Yugaṇāthās, of the

Kaula tradition are listed in their specific order in the Gurumaṇḍalakrama. The names of the Yugaṇāthās, their consorts or śaktīs, and their disciples are mentioned in reasonable detail. Worshipped with their śaktīs in each direction is the Gurumaṇḍalakrama. The names of the four Yugaṇāthās are mentioned to be Khagendranātha, Kūrmanātha, Meṣanātha, and Matsyendranātha.

While discussing the Gurumaṇḍalakrama, in the east is placed, Khagendranātha along with his śakti Vijjāmba and his disciples Vaktashti and Vimala with their śaktīs Illai Āmba and Anantameklamāmba respectively, in the south is placed Kūrmanātha and his śakti Mangalāmba, with his disciples Jaithra and Avijitha also with their śaktīs Illai Āmba and Anandamekhala respectively, in the west is placed, Meṣanātha and śakti Kāmamangala, with disciples Vindhya and Ajita with their śaktīs, Kullai Āmba and Ajaramekhala respectively, and in the north is placed Matsyendranātha and his śakti Kumkunāmba and his six sons with their respective śaktīs³. Kaula sastra was later spread across the subcontinent through Macchandanaṭha's six sons.

Reference of Yugaṇātha in Mahānayaprakāśa

While in the Tantrāloka, the concept of the Yugaṇātha and its specific details are mentioned, its esoteric aspects are, however, to be explored through other texts. *Mahānayaprakāśa* (MNP) is an important text that makes such a reference. MNP is an ancient Krama text, written by Arṇasimha, which deals primarily with the exposition of Pañcavāhakrama⁴ (Sequence of the Five Currents). Some of the verses in this text give us insights into two things, firstly, the secret behind the naming of the Yugaṇāthās, and secondly, the various meanings indicated in the krama or sequence of the Yugaṇāthās.

The MNP indicates that the esoteric meaning in the sequence of the 4 Yugaṇāthās corresponds to the 4 states of Vakh-Para, Pashyanti, Madhyama, and Vaikhari. Regarding their origin, the text indicates that it is from the outpouring of the supreme consciousness the best of the Siddhās, who are the Yugaṇāthās are manifested. Regarding their state of being, the Yugaṇāthās are those who are always free of the perception of duality and reside in the state of the void of pure consciousness (vyomadāman) in the form of the perceiving subject. Therefore, the Yugaṇātha is perceived to be a state of being, in addition to its historical relevance. This is also in line with the larger conception of the Tāntric tradition, that the Divine is both transcendental as well as imminent. As has been stated in the *maṅgalācāraṇa* of the text *Parāpraveśika*, Saṃvid (consciousness), is both *viśvātmikām* (the self-identity of the manifest) and *viśvottīrṇam* (while being transcendent to the manifest). This sequence and state of the Yugaṇāthās also mirrors this conception of Divinity, thus indicating their relevance

to the Tāntric traditions.

Regarding the esoteric significance behind the naming of the Yuganāthās, *MNP* says that Khagendranātha is called so because a Khaga i.e a bird, indicates a free and absolute transcendental movement in the highest state. This also indicates the state of Parā in the Vāk-krama scheme.⁵ Similarly, Kūrmanātha is called so because the state of being discussed refers to the first impulse of manifestation where complete withdrawal happens while being centered in the highest state, much like the movement of a tortoise that extends and withdraws its limbs, while staying cocooned in its shell. In this state is also indicated the state of Paśyanti in the Vāk-krama scheme. In the case of the Meṣanātha, the name indicates a free and focused movement towards the full extent of manifestation, through the realm of the senses, much as a sheep or a ram moves when amid intense activity. The aspect of power and freedom is the highlight of this state of being and hence corresponds to the madhyama state in the Vāk-krama. Finally, for the Kaliyuganātha, the name given is Matsyendra. The Matsya indicated here corresponds to all the various kinds of perceptions and activity, much like the nature of a fish, which is characterized by constant movement. Therefore, Matsyendra is the Lord of Matsya. Since the reference is made to activity itself, the indicated meaning is that of the limited doer. Therefore, Matsyendra is the Lord of all doers (individuals with finite kriya śakti). Regarding the state of being, the full glory or the absolute freedom of all doing, i.e. svātantrya, is what is indicated here. Therefore, it corresponds to the state of Vaikharī in the Vāk-Krama.

Reference of Yuganātha in Khacakraṇcākastotra

A much earlier text in the krama system called the Mahānaya, is the *Khacakraṇcākastotra* (*KCPs*). The reference of the Yuganāthās in this text shows us the influence they had on the system and that the union of this Krama system with Kula seems to have happened early on. The text referenced in the previous section, the *MNP*, was composed when the system reached its peak of development, and hence, we see an early archetype of the essential elements of both systems in this text⁶. The text is attributed to Jñānanetra, also called Sivananda, as he is praised as the first teacher who revealed the teachings of this text to the world.

Both the verses of *MNP* and the *KCPs* offer a description of the Yuganāthās as, not only a sequence of Siddhās of divine descent, but also states of being, especially connected to the concept of Vak. While in the *MNP*, the description focuses more on the state and the etymology of the names of the Yuganāthās, in the *KCPs*, the focus is on referring to the Yuganāthās and their consorts as various incarnations of the Goddess herself. The reference to the four Yuganāthās and their consorts comes in the section of the text, where the Kaali of the

Cycle of Speech (Gocakra) is praised. The section begins with praising the Goddess as the Mistress of the cycle of speech, as one who in the state of sentience in the lotus of heart of consciousness, as one mounted in the fourth sequence and revealed by the descent (avātara), which is persistence (stithi) and the sphere of revelation. This means, the text sees these as the qualities of the Yuganāthās - As those established in the state of the hrtpadma, mounted on the fourth sequence and those incarnated in the cycle of stithi⁷.

The text hails the Goddess Kali (Mangala) as verily the one who is born (sambhute) as Khagendra (nātha), Kūrma (nātha), and adorned with Meṣa (nātha) and Matsyendra (nātha). This not only references the exact krama found in the texts discussed earlier in this paper, but also alludes to the concept of “avatāra”, or “sambhūte” as is the term used here. As a side note here, specifically with regards to Matsyendranātha, is that this is perhaps the first reference of the siddha in an exclusively Krama text. While Matsyendranātha is almost exclusively discussed today in the context of Nath traditions, this reference in the Krama text shows that the influence and contributions of the siddha are far more widespread than is popularly imagined and that he holds a key position in the larger Tāntrika milieu.

Furthermore, in the text, the Goddess Maṅgalā has been called Vijnāmba, Mangalāmba, Kāmamaṅgalā, and Konkanāmba, who are the consorts of the four Yuganāthās, mentioned in the respective order. While offering praises to Konkanāmba, the text refers to her as the “mother who is consort of the first Siddha of the Siddhās”, thus indicating the highest Śakti⁸.

Regarding the text’s definition of a Mahākaula, it states that it is he who knows and who has in his purview the Mahārtha (the great reality). Qualifying this definition further, the true yogi i.e. the Mahākaula is one who knows the speech that enlightens (kathana), the worship of the Krama (kramapūjana), the transference of insight from the master to disciple (which is omnipresent and free of all demonic possessions), the playful joy of entry into Sound, and the consuming fire of emission and assimilation. This also shows the inseparable unity that the kula and krama systems, forming an integral system called Kaula krama⁹.

Reference of Yuganātha in Kaulajñānanirnaya

Kaulajñānanirnaya (*KJN*) is undoubtedly one of the most important texts in the Kaula tradition, specifically Yoginikaula. Attributed to Matsyendranātha in authorship, it has references to the concept of Yuganātha, albeit not a literal reference. It refers to the Kaulajñāna (knowledge of the Kaula) through various ages, which could be understood to be revealed through the Yuganāthās.

In the previous sections, the references to the Yuganāthās have indicated a more esoteric sequence of states of being, which in an embodied form becomes the

four great Siddhās. However, by the time of the composition of the *KJN*, two specific changes seem to have occurred – Firstly, an emphasis on the teachings as transmitted through Matsyendranātha, and secondly, an emphasis on viewing the Yuganāthās as embodying and reviving the teachings of the Kaula (Kaulajñāna), over the ages, rather than states of being. Moreover, Matsyendranātha's transmission of the Kaulajñāna is viewed as a “secular” transmission when compared to the “non-secular” or “sectarian” transmissions referenced in the previous sections. By this, what is meant is that there appears to be two ways in which the teachings of the Kaulās were transmitted, one within the context of a specific deity-practice-oriented tradition, as in the case of Krama, and the second within the context of a generic principle-practice oriented tradition like the Kaula teachings mentioned in the *KJN*¹⁰.

When describing the course of transmission of Kaulajñāna, the secret doctrine of the Kaula, it states that it first descended from the highest state to the Mahākaula, further on to Siddhakaula, and finally to Matsyōdara. These would refer perhaps to the scriptures or forms of Kaulajñāna that were propagated in each age by the Yuganāthās. In accordance with the four yugas, in the first yuga, this knowledge was called Jñānanirṇīti (Auspicious knowledge), in the second, Mahākaula, in the third, Siddhāmṛtā (also known as Siddhakaula), and in the fourth, the same knowledge is manifest through Matsyōdara. Here, Matsyōdara refers to Matsyendranātha¹¹.

Macchanda as Kaliyuganātha

From the references and explanations given in the previous sections concerning the concept of Yuganātha, it is clear that Macchanda is revered across various important texts as the Yuganātha of this age (Kali). Various texts refer to the four Yuganāthās and connect them to the corresponding Yuganāthās, thus establishing the importance of the Yuganāthās in the corresponding yuga and Macchanda as Kaliyuganātha.

The *Manthānabhairava Tantra* (*Mbt*), it is mentioned that in Kṛta yuga, Śrī Khagendra nātha founded the Jñānanirṇītikaula, in the Dvāpara yuga, the Śrī Kūrmanātha founded the Mahākaula school, in Treta yuga, Meṣanātha founded the Siddhāmṛtākaula school, and in Kaliyuga, Matsyendranātha founded the Matsyodarākaula school, in order to propagate the Kaula teachings¹². In his work *Canon of Śaivāgamās*, Dr. Mark Dyczkowski states that *Niśvāsataṭvasaṃhita* (*NSA*) and *Yoginihṛdayam* have associated their sampradaya with the four Mahapeeths of Kamarupa, Jalandhara, Pūrṇagiri, and Odyāna, and earlier commentators have connected these with the four Āmnāyās. Each of them is associated with the four Yuganāthās of the Chaturyugas.

Consequently, it can be seen that this Yuganātha worship was brought into the Śrīvidya tradition. Hence, Vidyānanda in the *NSA* commentary has termed Śrīvidya generic to all Āmnāyās¹³.

Similarly, while examining *Mbt*, we find that at the time of Abhinavagupta, Kālīkula had several independent texts: *Yonigahvaratantra*, *Ūrmikaulārṇavatāntra*, *Kālīkulakramasadbhava*, and *Devīpanchaṣṭaka* etc., survive in a few manuscripts. A study of these sources reveals that they all refer to Yuganāthās as the oldest gurus. However, this was not the case with the Bhairava tantras in which Kālīkula was embedded¹⁴.

Similarly, in *Cincinimathānusccrasamuccayam* (*CCMS*)¹⁵, it has been stated that in Kali Yuga the tradition of Trikaṃāthikā, which belongs to the Purvāmnāya, is transmitted through Yuganāthās, who are part of the siddhauga mode of transmission. In the First Yuga incarnated Khagendranātha and Vijāhuti were incarnated, with Vimala and Suśobha being their disciples. In the second Yuga incarnated Kūrmanātha and Mangalājyotī with Ajita and Vijita being disciples, and in the third Yuga incarnated Meṣanātha and Kāmāngā, with Khakulanātha and more than 64 kulas being disciples. *CCMS* goes on to say that in the Fourth Yuga i.e. Kali, belongs to the tradition of Oṃ (Oṃvalli) founded by Mīnanātha, which is another name for Macchandanātha. He is also referred to as Piṅgalanātha. The text states that he obtained the Kulaśāstra, which was thrown into the ocean by Kārtikeya. Kuṃkumā was his consort, and to them were born 12 princes. Bhadra, Amarapāda, Mahendra, Khagendra, Mahīdhara, and Guṇḍikanātha did not have the authority to teach, whereas Amara, Varadeva, Citranātha, Olinātha, Vṛddhanātha, and Gudikanātha, went in six different directions and transmitted six traditions of the Kaula. Thus, through his own contributions and through his sons/princes, Macchandanātha transmitted the teachings of the Kulaśāstra in Kaliyuga.

It is also pertinent to note here, that one of the primary contributions, based on the readings of the early and later Kaula texts, is that Macchandanātha appears to have effectively domesticated the crematorium-based practices of the Yoginikaula practices and made them available to the householder practitioners by internalizing and essentializing the elements and practices in the form of rituals. In this way, Macchandanātha has influenced the very nature of Tantric ritual and practice as we know it today.

Macchandanātha: A Brief Overview of His Persona

While the main concern of the paper is the elucidation of the concept of yuganātha and establishing that across several traditions, since Macchanda is considered the yuganātha of Kali yuga, it is also pertinent to examine some of the myths and stories surrounding the

personage that is Macchanda. A brief examination of this will set the stage for further studies on the influence of Macchanda on the Tāntric traditions of today.

Macchanda possesses multiple names across texts and traditions¹⁶. In *KJN*, he is called Macchaghnāpāda, Macchendrapāda, Matsyendrapāda and Mīnapāda. In *Akulavīratāntra*, he is called Mīnanātha and Macchendrapāda. *Kulānandakārika* contains the name Matsyendra. *Jnānakārika* mentions him as Macchindranāthapāda.

Significant disparities exist in the historicity, life, and times of Macchanda, according to various scholars. References pertaining to this matter are scattered across Tāntric-Yogic texts, folklore, and other sources. In the legend of Macchanda, we find that, due to his overarching influence, his story has attained a mythical status, much like the Rishis and the Devatas of the various Indic traditions.

With regards to the period in which Matsyendranātha lived, it is certain that he lived before the time of Abhinavagupta due to the references he has made. This places him before the 11th century¹⁷. While the exact time is uncertain, by examining his connections with various historical personas such as kings and sages, he must have lived sometime between the 6th and the 9th centuries. The exact placement in time is ambiguous due to the lack of evidence and the overarching influence he had over various traditions that emerged at various times.

The case of the location of his birthplace is equally shrouded in mystery due to the lack of direct evidence. While most references concur that Candradvīpa is the origin point of Macchandanātha, there exists a debate on where exactly it is. While many scholars state that it is in Bengal, Tibetan lore states that it is an island in the Brahmaputra River. Dvivedi notes it to be Chandragiri near Kamarupa¹⁸. Similarly, the exact location of the Kadalikṣetra where he is said to have lived with his consorts is also debated. While Kamarupa in Orissa is taken as the most likely location of the same, Kadri in Mangalore, Karnataka, Kullutadesha, Simhala, and Strirājya near the estuary of Satluj, Kadalivana in Śrīsailam are all possible locations. Dupuis, perhaps considering the inadequacy of the methods involved in placing Macchandanātha in linear history, has also proposed that these locations might also be heterotopic spaces, defying the logic of linear spatiality.

Macchandanātha is most famously known to be the Guru of the great Nātha, Gōrakṣanātha. However, his connections with various Tāntric and non-Tāntric traditions are very deep and significant and show the extent of his influence in the development of these traditions. As the preceptor of the Kaula doctrine in the current age (Kali Yuga), Matsyendra is considered as one of the foremost Gurus of Tantra. The versatility of his acts

can be perceived through the territorial expanse of his influence, spanning from the Southern coast to Oḍiyāṇa in the far north.¹⁹ His contributions to Yoga and Tantra are also seminal in nature. He is considered to be the first master of Haṭha Yoga, and the Nāth sampradāya recognizes him as the first human Guru. He is known to be an adept of Yoginīkaula, and the Trika Shaivism of Kashmir regards him as one of the initiators of the doctrine. Certain narratives depict him as the father and guru of the Jain Tīrthaṃkaras Neminātha and Pārśvanātha.²⁰ In the Kathmandu valley, he is identified with and venerated as Karunamaya-Avalokitesvara²¹. In the Eastern India, particularly Bengal and Assam, he has a key position in the legends concerning his enigmatic life.

Obeisance to the Gurumaṇḍala (circle of the masters) is key to many Tāntric rituals. Macchanda is invoked as a Guru in the cults of Kali, Kubjika, Tara, Bhairavi, Tripura, Shyama, and so on. His contributions to the Sabara tāntricism, employing mantras composed mostly in vernacular languages, are significant. Among the 84 MahaSiddhās revered in Vajrayana Buddhism, he is identified as Luipa and/or Minapa. Macchamuni who is counted among the eighteen major Tamil Siddhās, whose doctrine and practices dealt with alchemy, yoga, medicine, and tantra, is also considered as Matsyendra himself²². Hence, it is evident that his identity and teachings lie at the confluence of the esoteric dimensions of various Indic religious traditions.

Conclusion

The paper has delved into the concept of Yuganātha as expressed in multiple texts and established not only the importance of the concept but also the phenomenon of the advent of Yuganāthās in the cycles of time itself. It also examines its literal, symbolic, and esoteric meanings, including the “avatāra-lakṣya” of the Yuganāthās. The paper has further examined the significance of the Yuganātha of the age of Kali i.e. Macchandanātha, and how various traditions hail him to be the primary teacher of the Kaulāgamā in this age. We conclude with a brief description of Macchandanātha himself, primarily to underline his importance in the Bhāratiya spiritual lore. In future works, a deeper examination of Macchanda's lore, his mission and work as the Kaliyuganātha, and the true extent of his influence in almost all the Yogic and Tāntric traditions of Bhārathā can be examined in detail.

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