

# Akhārās

## Warrior Ascetics

The Hindi term *akhārā* means “wrestling arena,” from which *akhāriyā* derives, meaning “master fighter,” “skilled manoevrer,” or “strategist.” There is a network of *akhārās* throughout India, particularly in the north, where men train in wrestling and other methods of fighting. *Akhārās* specialize in various techniques of fitness and combat, which include the use of weights, clubs, and maces. The *akhārās* have a resident *guru*. The wrestlers’ patron deity is → Hanumān. This network of *akhārās*, which serves local men who typically train before or after work, is distinct from another network of *akhārās* pertaining to groups of (formerly) militant ascetics with particular religious and sectarian identities.

That religious ascetics would be inducted into fighting regiments is neither necessarily perverse – in the context of the history of traditional Hinduism – nor necessarily a radical break from a previous mode of life. There is an obvious similarity in the lifestyles of both soldiers and ascetics: both require rigorous self-discipline, enduring the hardships of lengthy travel and extended periods of camping; subsistence, sometimes, on meager rations; being subservient to a commander or *guru*; and enduring extended (or permanent) celibacy. In medieval India, asceticism, trade, and war were not incompatible.

Fighting ascetics are usually referred to as *nāgās* (deriving from the Hindi term *naṅgā*, “naked”). *Nāgās* are usually almost naked, except for a loin-cloth (*laṅgoṭī/kaupīn*), and besmear their bodies with ash known as *bhasm* or *vibhūti* (“supernatural powers,” “dignity”), the most sacred (or pure) form of which is made from the product of burnt and filtered cow dung. They keep a sacred fire (*dhūnī*), and some have experience of training in fighting and the use of basic weaponry, particularly the sword, mace, and dagger. Some members (particularly *nāgās*) of some *akhārās* smoke a great quantity of *gāñjā* (the buds of female cannabis plants) and *caras* (cannabis resin), mostly in chillums (Hind. *cilam*, clay pipe), and may also regularly eat *bhāṅg* (prepared cannabis leaves; see also → intoxicants). While some *nāgās* keep their

hair short, many wear *jaṭā* (dreadlocks). In terms of appearance and lifestyle, *nāgās* are in many respects indistinguishable from South Asian Sufi *faqīrs* (Arab.; Hind. *fakīr*). Some *nāgās* practice rigorous austerities, such as maintaining an arm aloft (*ūrdhvabāhu*) or remaining standing (*khareśvarī*) for many years (see also → *sādhus*); some practice *yoga* exercises.

## Origins of the Akhārās

One of the earliest available (semihistorical) references to militant (or armed) ascetics (or *yogīs*) in the Indic world is in Bāṇabhaṭṭa’s 7th-century romance *Harṣacarita* based on the life of King Harṣa, who ruled (606–648 CE) North India from Kanauj and Thanesar (Sthāṅvīśvara), near Kurukshetra (150 km northwest of Delhi). In the *Harṣacarita* appear two ascetics (Pātālasvāmin and Karṇatāla) who eventually become employed as personal guards to King Puṣpabhūti, “elevated to a fortune beyond their wildest dreams... occupying the front rank in battle” (*HCar.* 3.130). In the *Bṛhatkathāślokaśaṅgraha* (8th–10th cents.), there is a reference (18.202–207) to “mendicant mercenaries with strange weapons” who are described as shaven-headed → Pāśupatas who are protecting trade. There are a couple of references (see Sanderson, 2009, 261–262n616) in the *Mayaśaṅgraha* (5.182) and the *Piṅgalāmata* (10.28–31), from the 9th to 12th centuries, to Śaiva *maṭhas* (monasteries) containing armories for the storage of weapons of war. In a frequently cited reference to fighting ascetics in the mid-16th-century *Bijak* of → Kabīr (*Ramainī* 69), scorn is poured on *yogīs*, *siddhas* (another name for *yogīs*), *mahants* (chiefs/superiors), and ascetics who resort to arms, keep women, and collect property and taxes. An entourage of (perhaps) three thousand, which included armed *yogīs* in service to a *yogī* king in conflict with a ruler in Gujarat, is described by Ludovico di Varthema of Bologna the early 16th century (see Winter Jones, 1863, 111–112) in what may be the first

account by a European of a contingent of armed ascetics.

Another incident often referred to in accounts of the early history of *akhārās* is of a conflict reported at Thanesar. In 1567 the Mughal emperor Akbar (1542–1605) watched a battle between two groups of ascetics who had become disputatious concerning the right to collect alms from pilgrims who had gathered at an annual pilgrimage to Thanesar. The two groups, who numbered around three hundred and five hundred, are referred to, respectively, as “Purī” and “Kur” (or Gur) *saṃnyāsīs* by Abu al-Fazl, one of the court biographers of Akbar. The “Gurs” were in all probability “Giris” (Purī and Giri are two of the ten names of *saṃnyāsīs*: see below). The fighting ascetics were armed with stones, swords, and *cakras* (metal wheels that may be hurled at opponents). Akbar instructed his troops to assist the Purīs, who were the faction weaker in number, resulting in their victory. About a score of the combatants died.

Some commentators follow J.N. Farquhar (1925), who reported, based on anecdotes, that Madhusūdanasarasvatī (1540–1647), the well-known → Vedānta philosopher, approached Akbar to seek advice on the protection of an order (to which he belonged) from harassment by armed Muslim *faqīrs* (notwithstanding the unreliability of this account, Madhusūdanasarasvatī did have a connection to Akbar’s court). According to J.N. Farquhar, Madhusūdanasarasvatī was advised by Rājā Birbal to initiate a large number of non-Brahmans into a militant order. Thus were many Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and, says J.N. Farquhar, “multitudes of Śūdras at a later date” admitted into the order. It is said that half of the Bhāratīs (see below) refused to accept this and went to Sringeri to remain “pure.” The recruitment of *nāgās* into organized fighting units appears to have occurred around the time of Akbar’s reign, although it is unlikely to have been in response to attacks by Sufis. Nearly all of the recorded conflicts between bands of ascetics have been between factions of Hindus, in most instances between Vaiṣṇava → Rāmānandī *vairāgīs/bairāgī* and Śaiva → Daśanāmī *saṃnyāsīs* (also known as *gosāīms*) at *melās* (festivals) over bathing priorities for particular *akhārās*. The Rāmānandīs and the Daśanāmīs are the largest of the 60 or so extant *sādhu* sects in India and Nepal, and also those with the greatest number of *nāgās*.

The evidence indicates that organized *nāgā* military activity originally flourished under state

patronage. During the latter half of the 16th century and the early part of the 17th century, a number of bands of fighting ascetics formed into *akhārās* with sectarian names and identities. These armies were of mercenaries who often largely disbanded during cessations of conflict and during harvest times, when many of the men would return home to attend to agricultural duties. The formation of mercenary *nāgā* armies occurred largely in parallel with the constitution of a formal and distinct identity for many of the currently recognizable sects of *sādhus*, including the Rāmānandīs and Daśanāmīs. Several commentators (e.g. Orr, 1940) have maintained that members of the Nāth sect (→ Nāth Sampradāya) have at times constituted elements of *nāgā* armies, but there seems to be no substantial evidence to support this assertion. It is most likely that observers mistakenly identified either Rāmānandīs or Daśanāmīs as Nāths.

## Conflicts Involving Armies of *Nāgās*

From the late 16th century until the early decades of the 19th century, many prominent regional regents recruited bands of *nāgās* to fight in inter-regional struggles for power. The Mughal emperor Aurangzib authorized in 1692/1693 five Rāmānandī commanders and their armies to move without hindrance. The British officer lieutenant-colonel Valentine Blacker included “*gossyes*” (i.e. *gosāīms*) in his account of the rise of infantry forces in India in the 1700s, comparing them in proficiency to Afghan and Jāt Sikh *khālsā* troops (the Sikh order, or brotherhood, known as the *khālsā*, was, according to tradition, founded by Gurū Gobind Singh, and its troops were drawn almost entirely from the Jāt caste of northwestern cultivators). They were particularly renowned for their nocturnal guerilla operations: naked, sometimes slippery with oil, and dangerous with the dagger. The disposition of regents to employ *nāgā* armies may have also been partly due to their reputation for “supernatural” yogic abilities, and the consequent potential apprehension of adversaries, and to several historical legal statutes that either restricted or annulled the ability of states to prosecute them, being of religious orders, for crimes committed.

In 1763, Pṛthvī Nārāyaṇ Śāh, king of Gorkha and the founder of modern Nepal, was engaged in a campaign to extend his empire into the Kath-

mandu Valley. His chief advisor and strategist was a Nāth *siddha* named Bhagavantnāth, who used his influence to negotiate various matrimonial and military alliances between Gorkha and some of the other 45 kingdoms of western Nepal. During Pṛthvī Nārāyaṇ's attack on the village of Saga, his Gorkhalese troops were confronted by five hundred *nāgās* – under the leadership of Gulābrām – who were fighting on behalf of one of his opponents, Jāyāprakāś Malla, king of Kathmandu. All the *nāgās* were slaughtered by the Gorkhalese army, though Gulābrām escaped.

During the 1780s, some seven hundred *nāgās* died in battle in another Himalayan province, Kumaon. A total of 1,400 *nāgās* had been enlisted, with the promise of substantial financial rewards, by King Mohan Cand in his unsuccessful attempt to recapture his seat in Almora, from which he had been deposed by his rival, Harṣdev Joṣī, king of the neighboring Himalayan province, Garhwal.

In the political history of North India, the most influential armies of *nāgās* were those commanded by three Daśanāmī *gosāīms*, Rājendragiri (d. 1753), and his two *celās* (disciples), the adopted brothers Umrāvgeri (b. 1734) and Anūpgiri (Himmat Bahādur; 1730–1804). These *gosāīms* had complex relationships with several wives, courtesans, and offspring, leading to lengthy legal disputes over inheritance and property. At the height of their careers, the *gosāīms* commanded armies of up to 20 thousand horse and foot soldiers. The movement and recruitment of troops were greatly facilitated by a network of weapon stocks and grain stores in the countryside. When on campaigns, most of which were in the Gangetic region, they carried equipment – including materials for mounting fortified buildings – on elephants and other pack animals and had camel-mounted guns. The army was equipped with excellent horses and state-of-the-art weapons, including musketry and artillery.

The *gosāīms* Rājendragiri, Umrāvgeri, and Anūpgiri, and their *nāgā saṃnyāsī* armies, fought on behalf of several North Indian regents who were the most important political actors in the region during the lifetimes of these *gosāīms*. Their mercenary approach to war resulted on several occasions in their changing sides to fight on behalf of former adversaries. The *gosāīms*' patrons in the 18th century included Safdar Jang – who was *vazīr* (chancellor) to the Mughal emperor Ahmad Shāh and ruler of the province of Awadh (the *gosāīms*

began service with Safdar Jang in 1731) – and his successor Shuja-ud-Daulah. (The Mughals also supported Rāmānandī *nāgās* at Ayodhya: Safdar Jang granted seven *bīghās* [approx. five-eighths of an acre] of land at Hanumān Hill in Ayodhya to Abhay Rām Dās, the *mahant* of the Nirvāṇī *anī* [see below].) Other patrons of the *gosāīms* included the Maratha rulers Mahādji Śiṃde and Ali Bahādur, the Mughal emperor Shāh Alam, the Jāt ruler Javāhir Singh, and the Persian Nāzaf Khān, who Anūpgiri joined in his campaign in 1776 in northern Rajasthan.

In league with the Afghans, the *gosāīms* *nāgās* also fought the Marathas. In the lead up to the Anglo-Maratha war, Anūpgiri and his forces also supported the East India Company, under Richard Wellesley. Campaigns were launched by the *gosāīms* against encroaching Afghans, and an unsuccessful attempt to capture Delhi was pursued in 1753, resulting in the death of Rājendragiri. In 1775 the *gosāīms* captured most of Bundelkhand from the Marathas. However, by 1803 the *gosāīms* were supporting the British in their (successful) campaign to conquer Bundelkhand. The *gosāīms*, in particular the Ānanda and Jūnā *akhārās* (see below), remained in service to the British for 17 months.

Beginning in 1743, numerous minor rebellions (which were eventually suppressed, by 1800) took place, in a period of famine, against the rule, trade monopolies, and taxation imposed by the East India Company in Bengal, which for most of that time was under the governorship of Warren Hastings. Peasants and marauding Sufi *faqīrs* and Daśanāmī *gosāīms* fought company troops in the Bengal region, with many casualties on all sides, in a series of military encounters. However, it was with the assistance of an army of *gosāīms* under Anūpgiri that the British were eventually able to capture Delhi and thereby extend their control over large parts of North India. However, after 1857 the company had no further use for the *gosāīms* and suppressed their military and banking activities. By this time, the *saṃnyāsīs*, owing to their mercenary activities, had become the wealthiest bankers and largest landowners in North India. (Many of the *akhārās* still derive revenue from landholdings today.)

Since the effective curtailment of their military power by the British, the main public arenas for the display of the military organization of the *akhārās* is at *melās*, particularly at *kumbh melās*.

## Becoming a *Nāgā* in an *Akhārā*

To become a *sādhu* not only entails renouncing one's family name and former caste identity in a rite of renunciation (*saṁnyāsa*; see → *āśrama* and *saṁnyāsa*) but also results in acquiring a new identity and a new name as a member of a recognizable renunciate sect. The *saṁnyāsa* rite to become a Daśanāmī *saṁnyāsī* is performed in two stages: the first is the *pañc guru saṁskār*, when the initiate acquires five *gurus*, and the second initiation is the *virajā homa* (the rite of purification), which is usually performed at a *kumbh melā*, when the initiate performs his own funeral rites, thereby relieving any family member of future responsibility in that regard. Once initiated as a *sādhu*, the initiate may then perform a subsequent rite to become a *nāgā* in an *akhārā* (which in some *akhārās* entails the tendon in the penis being broken, to ensure celibacy). The processes of becoming a *nāgā* are similar for Rāmānandīs, the first initiation being the *pañc saṁskār dīkṣā*, which is almost identical to that performed by → Śrīvaiṣṇavas (with whom the Rāmānandīs have a complex historical connection). A second ritual is required to become a *tyāgī* (see below), and a third ritual is traditionally required to become a *nāgā*, but in recent decades *nāgās* have been initiated without their first becoming *tyāgī*.

At *kumbh melās* one may see the camps of the 13 *akhārās* extant in South Asia. The Śaiva Nāths also have institutions in several places in India and Nepal but camp separately from the 13 *akhārās* and are not within the organization of *akhārās* pertaining to the other Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava sects. Seven of the 13 *akhārās* are Śaiva Daśanāmī *saṁnyāsī akhārās*. Three *akhārās* of the 13 are of the Vaiṣṇava Rāmānandī Sampradāy, which are referred to as *anīs* (army corps) in Vaiṣṇava terminology, *akhārā* being a subdivision of an *anī*. The Dādūpanth (see → Dādū Dayāl) also has an *akhārā*, which has an affiliation with the Rāmānandīs.

The other three of the 13 *akhārās* are affiliated with the Sikh tradition. Two are Udāsī (“detached”; see also → *sādhus*), namely, the Baṛā (large) Pañcāyatī Udāsī Akhārā, and the Choṭā (small) or Nayā (new) Pañcāyatī Udāsī Akhārā; the third of the Sikh-affiliated *akhārās* is the Nirmal Pañcāyatī Akhārā. Although historically involved in the Sikh movement, these three *akhārās* function as independent organizations. All 13 *akhārās* have administrative offices, particularly in the cities of

Banaras, Prayag (Allahabad) and Haridwar (for the Daśanāmīs), Ayodhya (for the Rāmānandīs), and Punjab state (for the Udāsīs).

Overseeing the activities of all 13 *akhārās* is an organization, the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad, which is based in Haridwar and meets to decide on practical and policy issues.

## The Daśanāmī *Saṁnyāsī Akhārās*

Daśanāmī means “he who has [one of] ten names,” those initiate names being Giri (hill), Purī (town), Bhāratī (learning), Vana (or Ban: forest), Parvata (mountain), Araṇya (wilderness), Sāgara (ocean), Tīrtha (pilgrimage place), Āśrama (hermitage), and Sarasvatī (knowledge). The most common names are Giri, Purī, and Bhāratī.

The seven Daśanāmī *akhārās* are the Nirañjanī, Jūnā, Mahānirvāṇī, Ānanda, Āvāhan, Aṭal, and Agni *akhārās*. The leading *akhārās*, in terms of members and property, are the Nirañjanī and Jūnā. The Jūnā has the largest number of *nāgās* and is believed to be the oldest of the *akhārās*. Members of the *akhārās* are also affiliated to one or another of 52 (or 51) *maṛhīs*, which are subdivisions of the *akhārās*. The system of *maṛhī* organization is further organized in a system of eight *dāvās* (section, claim). Within each *akhārā*, there is a hierarchy of authority – *mahant*, *śrī mahant*, and *mahāmaṇḍaleśvara* – and (nominally) at the apex there are the *śaṅkarācāryas* (see below). The *mahāmaṇḍaleśvaras* usually live in their own *maṭhs* or *āśrams* and generally have little practical involvement in the daily operation of the *akhārā*, except when they preside over initiation rituals and become involved in administrative issues. In all *akhārās* (including those of the Rāmānandīs, Udāsīs, and Nirmals), each of which has an administrative body (*pañc* or *pañcāyat*), there is usually a *sabhāpati* (president), and beneath *mahants* there is a hierarchy of other elected functionaries: *kārbārīs* (assistants), *thānāpatīs* (property managers), *sacivs* (secretaries), *pujārīs* (who perform ritual worship), *koṭvāls* (guards), and *koṭhārīs/bhaṇḍārīs* (who manage daily supplies). The main venue for initiations, elections to positions within the *akhārā*, and administrative discussions is *kumbh melās*. The Daśanāmī *akhārās* administer up to a hundred institutions, including temples, *maṭhs*, and *āśrams*.

Each of the Daśanāmī *akhārās* has a tutelary deity, namely, Kārttikeya (Nirañjanī), Dattātreya

(Jūnā), Kapil Muni (Mahānirvāṇī), Sūrya (Ānanda), Siddh Gaṇeś (Āvāhan), Ādi Gaṇeś (Aṭal), and Gāyatrī (Agni). The *nāgās* of each Daśanāmī *akhārā* revere the *bhālā*, which is a five-to seven-meter-long javelin engraved with the sign of the respective deity of the *akhārā*. It is carried at the front of the arrival (*peśvāī*) and “royal” bathing processions (*śāhī snān*) at *melās* by the chief *mahant* or by *nāgās*. The *bhālā* is usually kept at the headquarters of the *akhārā* that it represents, but during *melās*, it is planted in the ground near the temporary shrine of the tutelary deity, at the center of the *akhārā*’s camping area.

The members of six of the seven Daśanāmī *akhārās*, apart from the Agni *akhārā*, take one of the “ten names,” but members of the Agni *akhārā* take one of the four following names: Svarūpa, Prakāśa, Ānanda, or Caitanya. These are what are known as *brahmacārī* (orthodox Brahman undergoing religious studentship and chastity) names, which are the same four names given to members of the other main wing of the *saṁnyāsīs*, the *daṇḍīs*.

The *saṁnyāsī akhārās*, to which *nāgās* belong, function independently from other *saṁnyāsī* organizations, those pertaining to the other branches of the Daśanāmī order, comprising *daṇḍīs* and *paramahamsas*. *Daṇḍīs* are orthodox Brahmans and carry a stick (*daṇḍa*). They frequent their own *maṭhs* and *āśrams* and have no organizational connection to the *akhārās*. Their link to the *akhārās* is only in respect to their common belief in the foundation of their order by Śaṅkarācārya (→ Śaṅkara). *Paramahamsas* are affiliated with one or another of the *akhārās* but usually live independently in their own *maṭhs*.

The Daśanāmī *saṁnyāsī* order claims descent from the philosopher Śaṅkarācārya (*fl.* c. 700 CE), through four disciples who, according to tradition, were established in four monasteries (*pīṭhas*) at four places in India (in the north, south, east, and west); the five incumbent *śaṅkarācāryas* – two in the south – claim descent from these disciples. However, the tradition of the founding of four monasteries most probably dates from no earlier than the late 16th century.

The founding of the Daśanāmī *akhārās* is difficult to discern. According to traditions among the Daśanāmīs – one of which is recorded in an influential account by J. Sarkar (1958), which has been reiterated with anomalies in several subsequent publications – the first *akhārā* to be founded was Āvāhan in 547 CE, followed by Aṭal (646 CE),

Mahānirvāṇī (749 CE), Ānanda (856 CE), Nirañjanī (904 CE), Agni (1136), and Jūnā (1156). (In other sources the founding year of the Agni *akhārā* is given as 1370.) However, J. Sarkar adds one thousand years to some of the founding dates, which produces many inconsistencies. Notwithstanding accounts stating a greater antiquity, it seems probable that it was during the latter decades of the 16th century and the early decades of the 17th century that the Daśanāmī *saṁnyāsī akhārās* first formed, a time when diverse lineages of both monastic and militant renunciates coalesced into a sect with a distinct identity, sectarian history, and founding *guru*, namely Śaṅkarācārya.

## The Rāmānandī Akhārās

The Rāmānandī Sampradāy has both lay and *sādhu* communities, the latter comprising *rasiks*, *tyāgīs*, and *nāgās*, and is one of the four Vaiṣṇava Sampradāyas (*catuḥ sampradāyas*), the constitution of which has changed twice during the last four centuries. The *catuḥ sampradāyas*, which meet at *kumbh melās*, have an administrative body, the Akhil Bharatiya Khalsa, which oversees 412 sub-branches (known as *khālās*).

The traditional dates (based on the *Agastya-saṁhitā*) of → Rāmānanda are 1299–1410, but it seems more probable that Rāmānanda flourished in the 15th century. While some sources maintain that Rāmānanda came to northern India from the south (where he had been a disciple of Rāghavānanda), Rāmānandīs claim that Prayag was his place of birth. The language of the texts attributed to Rāmānanda indicates a North Indian provenance. “Rāmānandī” as a term of self-designation was first used around 1730.

The Rāmānandīs, whose main deities are → Rām, Sītā (see → Draupadī and Sītā), and Hanumān, appear to have organized their military branches between 1650 and 1720. There is a reference from 1734 at Galta (near Jaipur) to seven branches of the Rāmānandī Sampradāy, which seems to indicate the extant organization of seven Rāmānandī *akhārās*. It is most probable that the *catuḥ sampradāyas* were organized into systems of *dvārs*, *anīs*, and *akhārās* in two stages during four successive conferences, at Vrindavan (c. 1713), Brahmapuri (near Jaipur; c. 1726), Jaipur (1734), and Galta (1756). It was Bālānand who in the mid-18th century organized the army

of *nāgās* (the *rāmḍāl*) for service to Mādhav Siṃh, regent of Jaipur. Among the Rāmānandīs, 52 *dvārs* (doors/gates) – which are essentially lineages – are assigned to places throughout India and mirror the 52 *maṛhīs* of the Daśanāmī *saṃnyāsīs*.

Rāmānandī *tyāgīs* (renunciates), who are the largest subsection of the Rāmānandīs, have a life-style and appearance that are almost identical to those of Daśanāmī *nāgās*. Rāmānandī *tyāgīs* are also referred to as *vairāgīs* (or *bairāgīs*; without passion). While the *tyāgīs* are Rāmānandī ascetics, it is the Rāmānandī *nāgās* who are soldiers, who carry weapons, and who are given money by *tyāgī mahants* at *melās* to protect the order. Technically, only the *nāgās* are said to be in the *akhārā*. Unlike the *tyāgīs*, Rāmānandī *nāgās* wear stitched cloth and do not wear *jaṭā*. A Rāmānandī disciple (who usually receives the surname “Dās” during initiation) wishing to enter an *akhārā* has to pass through seven stages before he becomes a Vaiṣṇava *nāgā* (also known as *nāgā atīt*):

(1) *yātrī* (collects *nīm* [neem, bot. *Azadirachta indica*] sticks for his superiors and wanders alone or with the *jamāt* [fighting unit]);

(2) *chorā* (serves, draws water, and makes leaf-plates);

(3) *bandagīdar* (looks after food stores, serves food, and cleans *nāgā atīt*'s utensils);

(4) *huṛdaṅg* (cooks, offers food to the deity, calls “Harihar” [i.e. Viṣṇu-Śiva], carries the insignia and flag of the *akhārā*, and learns weaponry);

(5) *mureṭhiya* (worships the deities, supervises *sevaks* [servants], calls “*jay*” [“victory”], and has mastered weapons);

(6) *nāgā* (administers the *akhārā*, worships the deity, protects the order's property, leads the *jamāt*, and prepares for the *kumbh melā*); and

(7) *atīt* (decides important issues and guides *nāgās*).

This process of becoming a *nāgā* takes 12 years, after which he may vote in the *akhārā*, as a member of the *pañc* (the organizational body). Vaiṣṇava *nāgās* are organized in four divisions (*selīs*), according to where they were initiated: Haridvārī (at Haridwar), Ujjainiya (at Ujjain), Sāgarīya (at Ganga Sagar, near Calcutta), and Basantiya (at other places). The most important center for Rāmānandī *nāgās* is the Hanumānḡaṛhi Temple in Ayodhya.

The three Rāmānandī *anīs* collectively have eight *akhārās* among them: two for the Digambar *anī* (Rām Digambar, Śyām Digambar), three for the Nirvāṇī *anī* (Nirvāṇī, Khākī, Nirālambī), and three for the Nirmohī *anī* (Nirmohī, Mahānirvāṇī, Santoṣī). The *akhārās*' banners all display the sun (*sūrya*), an emblem of Viṣṇu.

## The Dādūpanth Akhārā

The Dādūpanth also has an *akhārā*, which joins the (Rāmānandī) Nirmohī *anī* for bathing at *kumbh melās*. Toward the end of Akbar's reign, Dādū (1544–1604), a cotton cleaner from Ahmadabad who was a *nirguṇī bhakt* (see → *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa*), organized a new sect of Rām devotees, the Dādūpanth, which comprises *virakts* (ascetics), *vastradhārīs* (householders), and *nāgās* (*khākī* [ash-clad] *virakts*). Dādūpanthī *nāgās* had a prominent role in the armies of various regents, particularly of Jodhpur and Jaipur, in the 18th and 19th centuries. They were employed as mercenaries from 1799 to 1938.

Dādūpanthī *nāgās* claim that they are descended from Sundardās, an early disciple of Dādū, and thus from the late 16th or early 17th century. Although the genealogy of the Dādūpanthī *nāgās* may have begun in the mid-17th century, at the earliest, firm records are only available from the second half of the 18th century. The *nāgās* were officially constituted in *akhārās* in 1756, but may have previously fought alongside Rāmānandīs. The organization of the *nāgās* into 11 *akhārās*, which are subsumed within seven *jamāts*, is attributed to Kevalrām and Hṛdayrām. Nearly all of the *nāgās* were of Rājput descent. By the late 18th century, the armed *jamāts* were numerically and politically dominant in the Dādūpanth.

## Sikh-Affiliated Akhārās

The Sikh-affiliated *akhārās*, the Baṛā Udāsī, Choṭā Udāsī, and Nirmal, revere and recite daily the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, the Sikh text that occupies a central place in all Sikh *gurdvārās*. Also of importance to the Udāsīs are the *Udāsī Bodh*, composed in Braj in 1858 (but written in Gurmukhī), and the *Mātrā* (measure/discipline; attributed to Śrī Cand), besides which they have their own version of the *Gurbilās* (early biography/hagiography of Gurū Gobind Singh) and Janamsākhīs

(biographies/hagiographies of Gurū Nānak). Like the practice among Daśanāmīs and Rāmānandīs, five *mahants* preside over the first initiation, whereby the initiate gains a new surname, usually “Dās” or “Brahm.” The initiate should be detached, shunning women, gold, tobacco, and spirits – though, as among other renunciate sects, occasionally Udāsīs marry and live as householders. Unlike Khālsā Sikhs, Udāsīs may shave their beards and cut their hair.

The Udāsīs are closer to mainstream Sikh tradition than some of the other breakaway Sikh sects of the 17th century, such as Mīnā (founded by Pṛthi Cand, 1558–1618), Dhir Malīā (followers of Dhir Mal, 1627–1677), and Rām Rāiyā (followers of Har Rāi, 1630–1661, the seventh Sikh *guru*). Distinctive traits of the Udāsīs are their Advaita Vedānta (*advait brahm*) philosophy (through which they interpret Sikhism), keeping a *dhūnī*, and practicing Haṭha Yoga (see → Yoga).

The tutelary deity of Udāsī *akhārās* is Candra Bhagvān (believed to be an incarnation of → Śiva), who was Śrī Cand (b. 1494), the eldest of the two sons of Gurū Nānak (1469–1539). After the death of Nānak, the leadership of the Sikhs passed to Gurū Aṅgad (a householder), and not to Gurū Nānak’s son Śrī Cand (a bachelor), who, according to Sikh tradition, founded the Udāsī order. Although Śrī Cand is not recognized within the Sikh *gurū paramparā* (succession of teachers), neither is he rejected. However, there is some historical evidence that Śrī Cand and his followers may have been rejected from the Sikh order. According to tradition, Śrī Cand lived past the age of one hundred, into the time of the sixth *gurū* of the Sikhs, Gurū Hargobind (1595–1644), which would mean that the Udāsī order was probably founded sometime between the end of the 16th century and the early 17th century. The *gaddi* (royal seat/sectarian leadership) of the Udāsīs passed from Śrī Cand to the soldier and householder Bābā Gurditā (1613–1638), who had four preaching disciples (*masands*), each of whom, according to tradition, founded in 1636 a *dhūān* (*dhūnī*), which are the four main divisions of the Udāsīs, namely, Bābā Hasan (1564–1660), Phūl Sāhib (or Mīān/Mihān Sāhib), Almast (1553–1643), and Gondā/Goindā (or Bhagat Bhagvān); these four leaders are known as the *ādi* (original) *udāsīs*.

According to another account, however, Mīān Sāhib and Bhagvat Bhagvān (i.e. Bhagat Gir, who was a Daśanāmī) founded not *dhūāns* but mission-

ary centers (*bhākṣīṣes*). According to tradition, six *bhākṣīṣes* were gifted by the Sikh *gurūs*, Hargobind, Har Rāi, Tegh Bahādur, and Gobind Singh (1666–1708), between around 1640 and 1700. The two most important *bhākṣīṣes* are those of Bhāi Pherū and Mīān Sāhib. Udāsī institutions, which have a tradition of education, generally function independently and are mostly in the Punjab region, though some are in eastern India; they comprise *akhārās* (which are larger institutions), *devās* (smaller institutions), and *dharmśālās* (rest houses for travelers and pilgrims). The head of an institution is referred to as *śrī mahant*.

The Baṛā Udāsī Akhārā was founded at Prayag in 1779 by Mahant Pṛtham Dās (1752–1831), with whose *akhārā* all four *dhūāns* are associated (some Udāsī institutions are not directly affiliated with the *dhūāns*). Some followers of Pṛtham Dās are *naṅgā* (i.e. *nāgā*); two subsets of *naṅgā* Udāsīs (the Nirbāṅ and the Nirañjanī) claim origins in the *akhārā* of Pṛtham Dās. They wear *laṅgoṭī* and besmear themselves with ashes.

The Choṭā (or Nayā) Udāsī Akhārā was founded in 1840 by Mahant Santokh Dās and some followers of Bhāi Pherū (i.e. Saṅgat Sāhib), a disciple of Har Rāi. Gurū Gobind Singh is credited in some sources with the institution of the Nirmal order, of which the *akhārā* (whose headquarters is in Kankhal, near Haridwar) was officially founded in 1862 under the leadership of Mahitab Singh (1811–1871).

Between the 1790s and 1840s, the Udāsī and Nirmal orders received extensive state patronage, and by the end of the 19th century, their establishments had increased fivefold, to around 250. In the early 1920s, during the Gurdwara Reform Movement, conflict arose between Udāsīs and Akālī Sikhs (Akālī – or Nihaṅg – Sikhs are a military sub-branch of the Sikh *khālsā*), resulting in a significant loss of influence for Udāsīs; though in recent decades, the Udāsīs have experienced a revival.

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MATTHEW CLARK

## Wrestlers

There are many different ways to understand how wrestling (*pahalvānī*, *mallayuddha*) within a gymnasium (*akhārā*) fits into the large framework of cultural practices in southern Asia. To appreciate the richness and significance of this way of life, it is useful to comparatively reference the place of the gymnasium in ancient Athens (Sansone, 1988; Scanlon, 2002; Cohen, 1992) and recognize the importance of sport, physical development, and masculinity in the articulation of classical Greek philosophy (Alter, forthcoming b). Although it is not usually defined as such in the context of Indic civilization – where athleticism has been expressed in ways that are not distinctively sportive – the *akhārā* can be seen as the nexus of key ideas and practices that reflect a broad range of ideas in the history of Hinduism. On the one hand, there are obvious, if deceptively simple, parallels between → Hanumān and Heracles as iconic wrestlers who define a particular kind of relationship between mortals and the gods. On the other hand, there are complex ways in which philosophical developments in both places in the ancient world took shape with reference to physical self-development, asceticism, and the embodiment of masculinity in relation to the control and regulation of sex and sexual physiology (Golden & Toohey, 2003; Halperin, Winkler & Zeitlin, 1990).

Just as the modern Olympic Games and a spectrum of different articulations of postcolonial nationalism have shaped contemporary sports

around the world (Alter, 1995, 2004a, 200), *pahalvānī* – which is a much more common designation than *mallayuddha* – is defined by the larger social, political, and economic dynamics that characterize India today (Alter, 1992a, 1993b, 1994a). As a sport, it has been incorporated into the infrastructure of national and international competition, albeit with reactions that range from enthusiasm to deep ambivalence and resistance. In conjunction with this, *akhārās* have become places where masculinity is defined in relation to a range of different political projects that cross the spectrum from utopian to militantly conservative (Alter, 1994b). Wrestlers from India, whose identity as *pahalvāns* links them to a distinct way of life rooted in the *akhārā*, compete with some success against international champions in the Asian, Commonwealth, and Olympic Games. This kind of modern synthesis of masculinity and nationalism was most distinctly embodied first in the early 20th century by Gama, a *pahalvān* who emerged from the princely state of Datiya to win in London and become a world champion (Alter, 2000).

There is no question that a cultural history of *pahalvānī* in the *akhārās* of South Asia must be understood in relation to nationalism, broadly defined. Within the rubric of nationalism, there are also many possible different trajectories of meaning, including gender, militant and anticolonial agitation, and sectarian and communal conflict. The essentializing tendency of militant