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Research Article

Role of Hagiography and Folklore In construction of Baba Masthath 's Legacy

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Abstract

This paper addresses the methodological challenges which we face during the reconstruction the historical narrative of Baba Masthath (18th century). He was regarded as a prominent figure of the Nath Sampradaya in North India, with particular attention to the region of Haryana. Nath tradition is mainly characterized by its rich oral legacy and the proliferation of legendary accounts. But the absence of coherent written records and the reliance on hagiographical literature has resulted in discrepancies. It shows regional variations in its historiography. This research paper, therefore, interrogates how historians can approach the historical figure like Baba Masthath. By using only textual sources, such as sectarian manuscripts, Nath Sampradaya doctrinal texts, temple records, and published secondary literature. They can deliberately exclude fieldwork or oral interviews in their research.

The present study first reviews the landscape of existing sources. Later it critically assesses the fragmentation, bias, and mythological layering inherent in Nath literature. The main argument of this paper is that previous research has illuminated the doctrinal contributions and reformist ethos of Baba Masthath. But there remains insufficient investigation into how historical fact is differentiated from myth, especially in the absence of standardized texts and amidst multiplicitous regional claims. It is still needed to rewrite the history of these kinds of historical figures. This paper employs textual criticism, comparative analysis, and historiographical approaches. The main objective of this paper is to seek the development of a framework, which can identify and contextualise reliable historical kernels within the available literature.

The findings of the present study underscore both the possibilities and limitations of text-based historical research in sects like Nath sampradaya with strong oral and mystical traditions. The paper contributes not only to the history of the Nath Sampradaya but it also offers broader methodological insights for scholars. It helps them in contending with a similar gap in early modern South Asian religious histories. Ultimately, this work aims to stimulate scholarly dialogue about reconstructing histories at the intersection of spirituality, social reform, and myth-making, especially for marginalized or textually diffuse communities such as the Nath.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The writing of history highly depends on the availability of reliable sources. These sources allow scholars to reconstruct past lives, events, and social processes. They reconstruct these events with a reasonable degree of accuracy. In the Indian context, the historical records remain uneven and fragmented. Particularly in the case of regional religious figures like Baba Masthnath. History of the figures who mainly functioned outside courtly, literary, or administrative frameworks are not found on a large scale. Saints who belong to ascetic traditions. Their teachings were transmitted orally from one generation to another. Their authority was rooted in lived practice rather than textual evidence. These types of saints often remain marginal within formal historiography. One such figure is Baba Mastnath. He is a revered Nath saint associated. He is associated with Asthal Bohar (Rohtak) in present-day Haryana. Despite his religious importance and command among followers, reconstruction of his life and legacy remain difficult due to lack of historical records (Vansina 12–15).

The main problem in documenting Baba Mastnath's historical presence lies in the shortage of contemporary written sources. Unlike rulers or administrators, he did not leave behind autobiographical texts, doctrinal writings, or dated inscriptions. So, it is difficult for historians to find sources that could anchor his life within a clear chronological framework. Instead, information about his life largely depends on oral traditions, myths, miracles, and institutional memory. Hagiographical sources also play an important role in reconstructing the life of Baba Mastnath. These memories were preserved and conserved by religious establishments like temples and Maths and local communities. These sources are highly rich in cultural meaning. But the main problem of these kinds of sources is that they pose significant problems for historians, in an attempt to distinguish empirically verifiable facts from symbolic or devotional representations.

Hagiography occupies a central position in narratives concerning Baba Mastnath. Accounts of his life often emphasise his miraculous powers, divine encounters, and moral authority. They don't talk more about specific historical events or social interventions. Such narratives are not unique to Baba Mastnath but are main characteristics of saintly traditions across South Asia. In this type of tradition where biographies frequently serve didactic, moral, and devotional purposes rather than historical documentation (Lorenzen 3–5). Consequently, the historian is in difficulty to choose between critical historical methods with these types of narratives.

This difficulty must also be understood within the broader context of the Nath Sampradaya. Nath sampradaya is a religious order that historically prioritised yogic discipline, ascetic practice, and gurudisciple communication across text authorship. They taught their teachings verbally. They are exercised and not even methodical written expounding. Thus, many Nath saints do not have any place in history. They do not save their history on paper but through traditions and oral memory of their ancestry (Mallinson and Singleton 87–90). This institutional feature of the tradition has directly stipulated the

nature and limitations of the surviving historical evidence regarding Baba Masthnath and lineage of Nath.

Such figures as Baba Mastnath were also marginalised with the help of the historiography of colonialism. Contemporary academics and British administrators tended to be biased towards written sources, laws and institutionalized religions which best aligned to the European historical classifications as compared to the local religious authorities like Baba Masthnath. His ascetic characters are a part of the ordinary religious culture. Colonial historians dismissed them as either irrational and folkloric and did not give them long-term historical scrutiny. When it was noticed at all such figures were usually noted in the district gazetteers or in the reports of the administrations, but casually and without any critical comment (Cohn 5–7).

This discriminatory way of archiving has carried on to influence the way the Indian religious history has been written. The post-colonial historians have in an effort to offset these deficiencies created the subaltern studies, oral history and cultural anthropology. Historians that have stood behind these schools have criticized the utilization of archives to write of history. They claimed that they ought to allow the voices of non-elites and other forms of evidence. Using the example of Ranajit Guha, he identifies that historical knowledge must consider the experiences and recollections of people that will not be part of the official accounts of the elite (Guha 46). In this kind of situation, folklore and oral tradition is not disregarded as a source of unhistory. They should be, however, discussed as the manifestations of social consciousness and collective memory.

It is also the religious organization which encloses Baba Mastnath particularly the Math at Asthal Bohar (Rohtak) which plays a significant role in the preservation and shaping of his heritage. These types of institutional memory are usually passed down via festivals, rituals, commemoration, guru lineages. The customs give continuation of generations. However, religious organizations are more prone to formulating past narrations reflectively as has been demonstrated by Harjot Oberoi in his work to legitimize the existing power and subsistence (Oberoi 9–11). This poses another complication of the work of historians. The way the memory is organized and how it is preserved and reconsidered over the years should be critically analyzed by them. There are fluid and adaptive oral texts. These develop as per the social, political and cultural environments. It allows traditions to be up to date and not moving with time accuracy.

Dates, places and causality of the past are often not real. As such, this makes it difficult to reconstruct. Jan Vansina argues that oral accounts may not provide accurate information regarding history. They, nevertheless, contain important information regarding values, belief systems and structure of society (Vansina 2730). Thus, absence of history is not the problem but is instead the presence of history in non-archival forms.

The current paper is not an attempt at creating a biography of Baba Mastnath and his legacy, so to speak, which is complete. Instead, it takes his life as a case study to explore the

methodological problems of the writing about history process in which the conventional historical sources are hard to find. This assignment seeks to develop the historical knowledge constituting, transmitting and writing where no written archives exist by examining folklore, oral narratives, institutional memory, hagiographical sources and scattered references in the documentary among others.

The paper justifies that folklore and collective memory is the thing that must be utilized as an alternative source of the history. They are mostly condemned to be unreliable or non-scientific. Though this type of sources cannot always be proven empirically, it provides an idea of how communities perceive the authority, sacredness and moral leadership. The continuation of the legacy of Baba Mastnath in the form of minimal documentation. It highlights that the religious ideologies, memory and traditions are important in writing of history.

Lastly, the Baba Mastnath case also challenges the historians to reconsider the issue of distinction between the facts and folklore. In the given paper, the more critical and analytical approach to historiography is required. Critical work with oral history and institutional memory has afforded historians the chance to write more detailed and nuanced histories of the Indian religious past although there is a scarcity of archival materials.

It appears in Folklore and Hagiography: Negotiating Faith and History

The most typical feature of folklore is the shared culture (tales, customs, beliefs, art) of a community of individuals. Folklores and hagiography were the main sources used in tracing the life of Baba Mastnath. The man was born in 1764 in a Hindu family. He was born in Haryana district of Rohtak in a village known as bohr. Sabla is his father who is part of Rebari Hindu community. He is said to be reincarnation of Guru Gorakhnath. He attended Math Asthal Bohar established by Guru Chauranginath in the 8th century. He rediscovered it and rekindled the Math. In 2012 his seventh disciple Mahant Chandnath founded Baba Mastnath University in his honour (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baba_Mastnath).

Festivals Baba Mastnath Mela is a festival of Baba Mastnath which is celebrated on the 7th (February March) of the Phalgun Sudi (Lunar) Phalgun (11th solar month, 12th Hindu month, Feb-March). The worship is done at samadhi of saint at Bohar (Rohtak tehsil). This fair is held at Khera Sadh (Rohtak Tahsil) in which the people pay worship to both the temple and samadhi (Rohtak District Gazetier, 1976).

This ritual was performed in Rohtak district in Haryana in Tilak of Baba Mastnath Ji. His disciples are scattered around India and he is especially remembered with awe in Rohtak. Baba Mastnath Ji helped a great deal in passing down Nath yogic practices in Haryana. He devoted his entire life to spiritual life, service and spreading the yogic teaching.

It is said that he reached spiritual perfection through extreme yogic training and meditation. He emphasized much on service to humanity, renunciation and discipline. His teachings did not limit to spiritual development. However, social reform was

another of his objects. One such teacher and an example was Baba Mastnath who taught people to live by the way of truth, simplicity, and self-control. He did not shape a religion, but one only. Haryana natives of other communities were also visiting him to take spiritual counsel and blessings. The Nath tradition associated with Baba Mastnath Ji helped to preserve and pass yoga in north India and particularly in the Punjab-Haryana belt. When he had acquired samadhi his disciples erected a samadhi temple named Rohtak in Asthal Bohar in his honor Baba Mastnath Ji. It is the place which grew up to be one of the most important educational and spiritual centers. This temple was also a major place of social and educational lives in this region in addition to being a place of worship (Asthal Bohar Math trust, 2004).

The unavailability of sources recorded in history renders oral stories to play the most significant role in the research of the life and influence of Baba Mastnath Ji to draw the line between reality and fiction. According to these stories which have been passed on by disciples, local disciples and guardians of the Asthal Bohar Math, he was a yogi who was devoted to meditation, high spiritual discipline and social service. The critical reading may assist the historians recognize the unchanging themes of his teachings like renunciation, moral conduct, and social responsibility that are more dependable, albeit in most of these manifestations, the special interest is made in his spiritual powers and moral authority (Briggs, 143-145).

The suffix nath literally translates to lord or master and this is why the word is used in many occasions. In the broadest meaning of this suffix is used, in relation to the names of some temples and their principal deities, as Kedarnath or Tuhgnath or Bodinath, indicating the veneration.

people are convinced in such worshipping places and their gods. In a looser sense still, more people are merely those who follow the teachings of Gorakhnath by the name Nath. They are also referred to as Gorakhnath meaning the sect(s) (panth) of Gorakhnath (Alter, 8).

Naths are not inclined to favoritism of the members of the low caste. Anyone, even a drummer of one of the low caste groups may become a Nath. Rather it would not have been an offensive attribute of the Naths like the Kanphata Yogis to associate with low-cast drummers in such ways, that could not have been done by more traditional Hindus (Alter, 1).

That is why the folklore and hagiography of Baba Mastnath and Nath sampradaya should be considered the sources of some kind of history. The data that illuminates the belief systems, values and remembering modes rather than genuine events. They do not demonstrate specifically what transpired in his life but the ultimate effect of his perceived spiritual power. The recognition of this distinction enables one to see the fact and folklore in a less obvious manner and brings out the necessity of methodological plasticity in the writing of the history of religious outcasts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is little information regarding Baba Mastnath. It is fragmented and to a large extent educated by oral traditions and Haryana regional historiography. It is a large burden to the historians who have difficulty coming up with a concrete historical account of Baba Mastnath and other such leaders. Most of the extant literature on Nath sampradaya is composed of the hagiography, oral literature, local gazettes and colonial records.

Most of the influential literature on the life of Baba Mastnath, and his legacy, are the productions of Nath schools. These literatures are a sainthood yogi of him. He is introduced as a gifted saint having spiritual powers and authority. The nath literature is generally accented towards spiritual lineage (guru-shishya parampara). This parampara deals with the problem of ascetic discipline, and miracle moments. They are inclined to lay accents on the devotional worship at the costs of historical confirmation. The importance of these writings to the way he is represented among the Nath community are that they are not arranged chronologically and lack critical interaction with the socio-political situations in the society. This is what religious historical scholars always noticed. Such hagiographies on their part amalgamate myth and history. It makes it difficult to find the difference between myth and reality. It also makes these sources erroneous as sources historical in their own right.

On the other hand, some of the sources, which elaborate the legacy of Baba Mastnath in much detail, are the oral histories that are stored in the villages and beyond Haryana. Studies on folklore emphasize that the oral histories serve as a repository of group memory, validation of moral values, spiritual power and locality. But these are oral stories which are customarily referred to as intrinsically plastic and contrived by embellishment, repetition and modern social imperatives. Romila Thapar and Ranajit Guha among other historians believe that oral sources play a crucial role in creating the past of the subalterns. However, they are to be taken literally, but not critically and culturally. Folklores discuss the nature of Baba Mastnath as a miracle and it is hard to say whether he refers to historical or symbolic narrator.

New multidisciplinary studies of folklore and memory and oral studies would not necessarily imply that the lack of archival documentation would be a sign of historical inconsequentiality. Rather, it illustrates how some people and events are pushed to the periphery in the up-market record keeping culture. The use of folklore as a historical source to understand cultural values, the power relations and social perspectives are the views of many scholars. The narration of stories orally is taken to be historical despite the questionable nature of facts. Through this the legacy of Baba Mastnath as a biographical object and symbol of the identity of Nath and the local religious culture is available to historians.

The literature gaps on the topic that currently exist are extremely intense, to say the least, with the most prominent one being the lack of source-based historical research entirely devoted to Baba Mastnath. The majority of the sources are isolated, anecdotal or embedded in larger accounts of Nath

yogis. The systematism of the study of the field is, needless to say, necessary. A work synthesizing regional documents, oral and comparative studies of Nath saints. This would transcend the devotional accounts and render comprehensibility of past events clear. In general, the available literature on the topic of Baba Mastnath provides the grander problems of writing figures of marginality or semi-legendary of the Indian religious cultures. Regional records and modern historiographical methods can be used to critically reconstruct even in the face of the massive preponderance of hagiographies and oral histories as sources of information.

3. METHODOLOGY

This work was done using a qualitative, transdisciplinary and interpretive approach. It is supposed to fill gaps and inconsistency of Baba Mastnath-related literature. This analysis is not based on one type of evidence as the dominant evidence is hagiographical and folklore.

The research process begins with a comprehensive analysis of the primary and secondary materials, which are available. Primary sources majorly include oral data collected through local folklore. Hagiographical books relating to the Nath sampradaya, district gazetteers and administrative reports during the colonial period are also part of primary data. These primary sources are supplemented by secondary materials such as the contemporary historical literature on Nath Sampradaya, the medieval Indian religious traditions, and folklore literature, and the literature on historiography and oral history. This sheer amount of data of gathering of source base enables cross-referencing and contextualization. Direct evidence of Baba Mastnath is very minimal.

Hagiographical sources are put under a critical textual analysis of uncovering patterns of narration, symbols and repetitive motifs rather than making the sources seem to be true biographies. They are studied in this paper as cultural and religious writings that signify the institutional needs, values and beliefs of the Nath sampradaya. Most attention is given to such topics as the spiritual lineage of the Nath Yogis, miracle tales and moral authority. It helps in the understanding of how the holiness of Baba Mastnath was constructed and transmitted over the years.

Oral narratives are examined by employing methods of memory research and folklore. These traditions are comparative analyzed through the focus on local changes, continuity, and alterations. The approach will help historians in distinguish between facts that may represent a historical nucleus and didactic or symbolic displays. Oral histories are discussed as sources that shed some light on the social attitudes, collective memory, and regional identity, instead of being discounted because of their insufficient empirical accuracy. They also contribute in the building of subaltern voices that are predominant in the elite record keeping.

The greater socio-religious context of the legacy of Baba Mastnath is rebuilt with the help of sources mentioned in the local and colonial sources concerning Nath yogis and their religious institutions. These type of texts are read critically. Administrative priorities and colonial prejudices look in the

mind. It is positive not to accept their classifications and interpretations blindly.

Finally, the study uses a comparative and triangulation-based approach. Oral traditions, history and Hagiographical tales are juxtaposed. Trends and regularity of multiple sources are considered persuasiveness rather than certainty in the absence of first-hand evidence. The selected methodology demonstrates that historical research can still be conducted with precision, criticality, and interdisciplinary investigation through the careful attention and critical analysis of the information that is available without overlooking its weaknesses. Through this approach, this paper is not aimed at developing a full life story about Baba Mastnath. But to objectively detach reality and legend, and to judge his cultural and historical impact in relation to his place and to his religion.

4. FINDINGS

In the current research, it is observed that the Baba Mastnath continues to be recalled in the religious memory and the Nath Sampradaya traditions. He plays an important role in Nath Sampradaya even though there is no considerable archival information. His historical influence is mostly oral and hagiographical in nature. In these works he is always depicted as a spiritual guru and a morally upright being. But there is a lack of chronological correctness of these materials. But they are also thematically continuous to indicate a coherent and strong tradition of memory.

Another conclusion that is critical to this study paper is that instead of diminishing the influence of Baba Mastnath, the historical ambiguity surrounding this person has contributed towards its expansion in a very proactive manner. That there are no fixed dates, places, or verifiable events has enabled his legend to be borrowed and re-interpreted by other places and Nath lineages. This heritage is determined by taking into consideration the local social, religious, and cultural needs. This mobility has helped Baba Mastnath to be a symbolic figure that unites the Nath lineage. He acts as a connection between various communities and encourages institutional continuity. The study also has later institutional and religious accounts of him and Nath Sampradaya. They often bestow upon him moral authority, spiritual validity and social improvements, looking back, an action of historical overlapping which amounts to tradition and memory always redefining the past. Consequently, there is an impact of Baba Mastnath on his past activities and in the contemporary manner. His image has been used over the times to sustain his power, continuity and religious and regional identity.

It also shows how the weaknesses of historical record keeping were manifested in the minimal mention of Baba Mastnath in the colonial records. It does not show his social insignificance. When carefully studied, folklore and hagiography prove to be valuable assets. These sources show patterns of religious authority, communal identity and belief. Finally, the conclusions are that the most effective method of understanding the role of Baba Mastnath is the spiritual and cultural influence. It is used to attract attention to the value of folklore in reconstructing the neglected histories.

5. CONCLUSION

The study, Role of Hagiography and Folklore in construction of Baba Mastnath legacy, conducted in this paper reveals that oral and hagiographical tradition has significant contribution to the examination of religious and spiritual lives. These sources demand a critical approach of history to read. The absence of certified inscriptions and modern archival documentations in the example of Baba Mastnath makes his historical reconstruction highly challenging. His legacy, biography, and life are predominantly maintained in oral traditions, hagiographies, folklores and sectarian histories. Such stories have developed throughout numerous generations. These are sources of cultural importance and symbolism. They often place the ideals of spirituality on a higher plane than historical reality. It renders it difficult to identify historical events by academics. But this paper argues that Baba Mastnath should not be pushed to sidelines because of such limitations. His continuing socio-religious relevance, on the other hand, is testified by the permanence and spread of these stories themselves. Folklore and hagiographical traditions present the manner in which the local communities regarded Baba Mastnath. It illustrates how his spiritual power was constructed and how his legacy became confused with institutional memory, religious practice and regional identity. These sources offer valuable information on devotional customs, transmission of nath sampradaya spiritual traditions and impact of saintly personalities on the flattened society when critically examined and situated in social, political, and theological contexts of the broad society.

The conclusion also notes that the purpose of any historical research is to understand how history, memory and belief intersect each other as opposed to the process of extracting facts that can be verified out of layers of myth. The interdisciplinary approach that incorporates textual criticism, oral history, anthropology, and regional studies helps scholars go beyond binary distinctions between the fact and fiction. Instead, one can have a more subtle insight into the impact of Baba Mastnath as a cultural icon and historical figure. Lastly, by showing us the manner in which the spiritual power is remembered, re-explained, and to continue to exist over the years the record of people like Baba Mastnath enhanced our understanding of Indian religion history. The question is how we can reconstruct this type of history even in the absence of the usual historical records

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