



Book Review

Vijay Sarde. (2023). *Archaeology of the Nātha Sampradāya in Western India: 12th to 15th Century*. London: Routledge. Pp. xiv+214. Price: \$128.00. ISBN: 9781032215648. Hardback.

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The *Archaeology of the Nātha Sampradāya in Western India: 12th to 15th Century* (henceforth *Archaeology*) is the most recent title in the Routledge series 'Archaeology and Religion in South Asia', published in association with the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. In it, Vijay Sarde maps sites, images, and texts to clarify our understanding of early Natha history in West India. While the book's title classifies it as a work of archaeology, this timely monograph is impressively interdisciplinary, employing the model of 'cultural landscape' to make sense of what is a vast archive of archaeological, architectural, art historical, epigraphical, and textual sources. Whereas earlier estimates have dated the emergence of the Natha *Sampradaya* to the early modern period, Sarde marshals letters and stones to argue for a much earlier date—as early as the 12th century CE, largely coinciding with the rise of the Yadava dynasty in the Deccan. The book is organized into 6 chapters, with the introduction and conclusion constituting the first and last.

In the first chapter, i.e., the introduction, the author justifies his 'cultural landscape' methodology and situates the book project within broader archaeological, art historical, and literary discussions in Natha studies. In chapter 2, Sarde surveys early Marathi works like the *Lilacaritra*, the *Vivekadarpana*, the *Jñanesvari*, the *Tattvasara*, to chart the development of the Natha tradition from the 12th century onward. The second half of the chapter looks at the Natha *Sampradaya*'s forerunners, including an important excursus on its connections to Buddhism. Chapter 3, the book's most ambitious and significant chapter, turns from literary to what Sarde calls archaeological evidence. Examining a multitude of sites (like natural and rock-cut caves, temples, stepwells, forts, and gates), images (sculptures, reliefs, murals), and inscriptions, Sarde tracks major developments in western India's cultural landscape—from the spread of Buddhist, Jaina, and Hindu sites in the 5th to 9th centuries, to the proliferation of Shaiva (Pashupata, Kalamukha, Kaula, and Kapalika) institutions in the 9th to 12th centuries, to the rise of the Natha *Sampradaya* and Natha-affiliated sites in the 12th to 15th centuries CE. Thankfully, this chapter contains several photos, figures, and tables that help to make sense of the data. One table cites disputed dates for every site. Another notes the actual archaeological, epigraphical, or iconographical evidence found at each site. Finally, a map of all the Natha sites in Maharashtra and Gujarat offers a useful spatial perspective. The wealth of sites and sources covered in this chapter will prove to be fruitful points of departure for future research.

Chapter 4 focuses on Natha iconography. Often drawing from the rich hagiographical corpus to aid in identification, the author documents the sculptural repertoires, devoted to several major Siddhas like Adinatha, Caurangi, Virupaksha, Kanha, Jalandhara, Nagarjuna, Vinapa, Ghantapa, Khadgapa, Kankalipa, and others. Yet unsurprisingly, Matsyendra and Goraksha receive the most thorough treatment. Sarde then catalogues many of the iconographic elements shared by these Siddha images, like the *Singi* (horn), *Kundala* (earrings), *Vajnopavita* (sacred thread), *Danda* (staff), *Khappara* (begging bowl), and *Jata* (dreadlocks). However, the author also treads on thinner ice here, as he largely assumes that these images of Siddhas are intended to be depictions of Nathas without adequately determining what even is a Natha image in the first place. As current discourses in the study of Natha literature suggest, much

of the material *about* Nathas is produced neither *by* nor *for* Nathas, so what does it mean to call something a Natha? Is it safe to assume that every image of a Siddha is intended to be an image of Natha when so many other traditions in this time and place also revered Siddhas—such as the Buddhists, Jains, Mahanubhavas, Varkaris, and Virashaivas? These ambiguities ought to be considered in future scholarship. Nonetheless, the chapter concludes with an important discussion on Nathas and sexuality. Erotic imagery found at sites like Brahmani, Yelamb, Mankeshvar, Bhejgaon, and Pimpri-Dumala India present an intriguing counterpoint to the prevalent idea of Nathas as celibate reformers that is favoured in some academic circles.

In chapter 5, Sarde shifts his emphasis from the history of the Natha *yogis* to the history of *Hathayoga*. The author correctly points out that the earliest extant *Hathayoga* texts were all composed by Buddhists, but he refutes the popular hypothesis that *Hathayoga* may have developed from foreign influences like Chinese *Neidan* (inner alchemy). Instead, Sarde posits a primarily Shaiva genesis for *Hathayoga*, suggesting that such *yogic* techniques supposedly existed amongst Shaiva ascetics long ago but only came to be codified in written form from the 11th century onwards due to an increase in patronage and institutionalization. But if it was the patronage of Shaiva institutions that supposedly allowed for the textual codification of *Hathayoga*, then why are all the earliest sources Buddhist? Chapter 5 also presents one of the book's secondary arguments: namely, that a number of serpent stele, or stone slabs depicting upstanding and / or intertwined *Naga* serpents found at Shaiva sites across the region, are actually symbolic depictions of *Kundalini yoga*—which envisions a coiled serpent arising from the practitioner's navel region. However, I am unconvinced by this argument. The resemblance between the serpents in these stele and the serpent of *Kundalini* might evidence nothing more than the popularity of *Naga* iconography, encountered throughout South Asia. Admittedly, it may very well be that the serpent stele depict *Kundalini yogic* processes, but the argument remains weak until we have more evidence. In the second half of fifth chapter, the author highlights several images of *yogis* or other ascetics who are ostensibly engaged in *Hathayogic* practices. He refers to many of these images using names of *Asanas* (postures) adopted from modern postural *yoga*, but cautions that he does so descriptively, not anachronistically. However, he frequently employs other standardized *yogic* vocabulary—*Pranayama*, *Bandha*, *Kumbhaka*, and *Sahasraracakra*—to interpret images that might not actually be depicting those specific practices at all. Overall, these issues render the penultimate chapter the least compelling. Thankfully, the concluding sixth chapter returns to surer footing, beginning with a brief but useful survey of Natha history beyond West India. Finally, the author concludes by identifying opportunities for future scholarship.

While not without flaw, *Archaeology* is still undeniably successful in many ways. Sarde synthesizes an impressive number of sites and sources to refute more presentist narratives that date the reification of an incorporated Natha identity to the early modern period. He also rightly highlights the Deccan as a nexus for the early development of the Natha *Sampradaya* and of *Hathayoga*. While many of the book's veritable treasure trove of data, sites, and sources are largely archaeological in nature, *Archaeology* is also an important study of vernacular literature, shedding light on important early texts like the *Lilacaritra*—just in time for Anne Feldhaus's English translation of the same, to reach bookstores by early 2024. Scholars of South Asian religion, art, literature, and cultural geography will appreciate this book, which especially concerns those interested in ascetic traditions and yoga. Additionally, the thorough literature review in the first chapter and the shorter literature reviews at the beginning of each of the remaining chapters are of great use to graduate students and junior scholars still honing their grasp of Natha studies, as is the extensive bibliography. An instant classic despite its minor shortcomings, *Archaeology* will undoubtedly become a major reference for many future projects.