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The Sanskrit word *siddha* is a past passive participle from the verbal root *sādh*, which means to attain, to succeed, to accomplish. Besides denoting a somewhat vague class of semidivine beings, in several Indian religious traditions it refers to a person, human or otherwise, who has accomplished some kind of goal, typically one or more supernal powers (*siddhi*) and/or liberation from the cycle of rebirth (which is sometimes styled “great *siddhi*”). However, not everyone who has accomplished a *siddhi*, lesser or “great,” is called a *siddha*. In addition to their immense and freely wielded supernal powers, *siddhas* are noted for one or more of the following traits: unconventional behavior and lifestyle, having no hindrances or inhibitions to associate with all levels of human and nonhuman society, somewhat unusual (non-Sanskritic) names, criticism or even mockery of established religion in their literary expressions, and being conceived of as fountainheads and promulgators of new kinds of revelation, which they have achieved in miraculous ways.

The evolution of the term and the kind of being(*s*) it denotes has not been charted conclusively, and there is no general consensus on how to translate the word, especially since the interpretation may be context sensitive. Proposed renderings include but are not limited to: adept, attainer, accomplished or realized or perfected being, saint, sage, thaumaturgic ascetic, master of enchantment, magician, and sorcerer. In Buddhological literature, these terms are frequently preceded by the adjective “great” due to the influence of the Tibetan rendering *grub thob chen po*, prevalent in spite of the fact that the compound *mahāsiddha* is found only surprisingly rarely in Sanskrit sources.

### Early Occurrences of the Term

Buddhists were certainly not the first to use this term. According to Davidson’s historical overview (2002, 173–176), the earliest dateable epigraphical evidence is Jaina (2nd or 1st cent. BCE), whereas in what is perhaps the second oldest (474 CE), they are described as worshipping the Sun, and thus they may have belonged to the once very popular and widespread Saura cult.

Occurrences in post-Vedic Brahmanical, and later, especially Śāiva, sources are abundant. With very few exceptions, these early references portray *siddhas* not as individuals but as indistinct members of a class of celestial groups along with other such stock entities straddling the world of men and the world of gods (for instance *gandharva*, *kimnara*, *yakṣa*, etc.). It is in the Epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*, that we start to have individualized *siddhas*, namely Kapila and Viśvāmitra respectively; here the continuity with the Brahmanical *rṣi* is evident. However, there must have been human reflections of these beings, since Kautṣa’s political handbook, the *Arthaśāstra* (final redaction c. 300 CE), refers to employing *siddhas*, in this case probably best understood as itinerant sorcerers, as agents and spies (Davidson, 2002, 174–175; Olivelle, 2013, 233–234, 407–408). Here the continuity is with the more ancient figure of the *vidyādha*, a sorcerer seeking powers through means of spells and asceticism.

Starting with the early medieval period and the rise of tantric traditions, the number of individualized *siddhas* increases. The model adopted by Buddhists was probably that of the Śāiva *siddha*, although this relationship is at present poorly understood. The parallels in tropes – itinerant and/or unusual lifestyle, divine vision, fountainhead of a new cult obtained by miraculous means, and so forth – are, however, very close (e.g. Sanderson, 2007, 280, 404–405).

As in the case of any religion maintaining a tradition of “saints,” conceiving of *siddhas* as historical persons is perhaps a futile exercise, for they are complex and fluid characters created by varying measures of historical reality, pious veneration, glorification, visionary experience, and artistic genius. It should therefore be noted that when we are speaking of historical dates of *siddhas*, it is not the person we have in mind, but the persona as a literary event, that is to say either as a subject or as an author. Moreover, although the early *siddhas* were probably genuinely antinomian boundary breakers,
they were eventually turned into a social type or cultural category, with uniform appearance, behavior, and roles. It is very probable that many siddhas, especially those lesser known, were completely fictional creations cast by this type.

Buddhist Siddhas

Early Buddhist sources use the word siddha as an adjective (Davidson, 2002, 196, points out the usage of the poet →Mātrceṭa/Mātrceta) qualifying great rṣis (e.g. the Muhāmāyūrī Vidyārājñī; Takubo, 1972, 52–54) and/or accomplished sorcerers (e.g. the Amoghapāśaṅkalpaṇa; Kimura et al., 1998, 113, 119, 125, 126). The word is also used in a cliché tatah/evam/a siddho bhavati “and then/thus [i.e. after having duly performed the ritual described] he [i.e. the practitioner] will become accomplished [i.e. he will have gained access to the effects of the rite].” These effects are supernatural powers such as flying, becoming invisible, obtaining control over meteorological phenomena, gaining entry to the riches and pleasures of underworlds, clairvoyance, and so forth.

Early texts from the more mature tradition, that is to say after the 7th or 8th centuries when tantric Buddhism has become an independent means of liberation, state that for a siddha there is nothing more to be done, he is free of ritual obligations and postinitiatory observances (e.g. Guhyasamājatantra 18.99; Matsunaga, 1978, 120).

Still later sources eulogize siddhas as fully accomplished beings, practically buddhas, but the two categories are never con


Another late scripture (c. 12th–13th cents.), the Cāndamahārōṇaṣaṅkatantra (unpublished chapter 11, verses 2ff. read from Royal Asiatic Society London, Ms Hodgson 46, fol. 26), states that the eponymous deity can, according to the inclinations of sentient beings, manifest himself as the Buddha/a buddha, a siddha, the Dharma, the Community, and so forth. Here we see the siddha inserted between the first and the second items of the traditional Three Jewels. He is therefore a figure of paramount importance, but not cosubstantial with the Buddha/a buddha.

The earliest occurrence of the word siddha meaning an accomplished tantric practitioner with his/ her own name, lifestory, and teaching is at present unknown. Davidson (2002, 169–335) seems to conflate the term siddha and what he describes as siddha culture with what is perhaps better understood as antinomian esoteric Buddhist practitioners and their (sub)culture. It is more cautious not to apply the term siddha to persons not yet described as such by the literature of the tradition.

Most studies on siddhas are very optimistic about ascribing to some of them dates as early as the 8th century (a paradigmatic example is Sānkrtyāyana, 1934, 216–229). However, with a few possible exceptions, none can be dated earlier than the 10th century, and most are probably even later.

Perhaps the earliest “siddhas” of the Buddhist tradition are *Buddhajñānapāda and the duo *Kukkura/*Kukkurāja/Kukkūri (lit. Dog, Dogking, or “He of the Dogs”) and Indrabhūti. Although the earliest sources – Tibetan translations of an early 8th-century autobiographical passage and its commentary for the first (see Davidson, 2002, 309–316), and an early 9th-century Tibetan translation for the latter two (see Kanaoka, 1966) – describing them do not call them siddhas, they definitely exhibit some of the tropes later prevalent in such hagiographies. Both stories are about a new revelation (the Guhyasamājatantra and the Sarvabuddhasamāyā-
disciples. This moment is not present in Buddhajñ\(ā\)napā\(ḍ\)a's biography, but is found in later sources) and a group of devoted disciples.

The paradigmatic siddha for the more mature tradition was most likely Saraha. He is a well-known and studied figure (Guenther, 1969; Schaeffer, 2005; Jackson, 2004). His verses in Aprabhamśa are already quoted in the middle of the 10th century (Szántó, 2012, vol. I, 99) and at least one of his stanzas was incorporated into scripture (Luo, 2010, xxxiii, 5). The 10th century is also the period when the number of siddhas starts to grow vertiginously (see Szántó, 2012, vol. I, 47–48). Their number eventually ran into the dozens, and at some point before the end of the 12th century they were canonized in lists. The most commonly known such set is that of the 84 siddhas. The number is not entirely stable, for sometimes such lists contain 80 or 85 siddhas (Schmid, 1958); moreover, the names in the lists differ depending on the source (Linrothe, 2006a, 422–433).

Literature on Siddhas and by Siddhas

Literature on siddhas and literature attributed to siddhas has received much scholarly attention. Inaugurating this process stand two works published incidentally in the same year: Grünwedel's German translation of an anthology of 84 siddha biographies – or better, hagiographies – preserved in Tibetan (Grünwedel, 1916) and Śātrī's "Buddhist Songs and Dohās in the Bengali Language of a Thousand Years Ago" (Śātrī, 1916). These two emblematic collections, the biographies and the songs, were vigorously reexamined and discussed in the century to come, but several key issues remain to be settled in a satisfactory manner.

Siddha Biographies

It is usually assumed that there was a written Sanskrit work behind the aforementioned anthology of siddha biographies, the reconstructed title of which is given as *Caturaśītisiddhapravṛtti. However, the translator into Tibetan does not state this clearly: he merely says that he has translated the sayings of one Abhayadattaśrī, a master from Tsam-parṇa (perhaps Skt. *Campārṇya, the Campā forest in what is now West and East Champaran border districts of Bihar state). This translator, Smon grub shes rab, most likely a Tangut/Xixia (西夏), is assumed to have been active in the 12th century. For learned notes and a bibliography of editions, related works, and translations, see Martin, 1997, 26–27. This work – if it was one – is actually considered as part of a corpus, a brief account of which is given by Kapstein, 2006, 52–56.)

Grünwedel was reluctant to provide a critical view of what these stories may have meant, and preferred to postpone judgment until more tantric material was examined (Grünwedel, 1916, 141). A more recent translator suggested that the biographies can be read not only as entertaining didactic stories, allegories of and for tantric practice, but also as works that may provide some historical insights into the life of some personages from between the 8th and 12th centuries (Dowman, 1986, xi). A more nuanced view is that of Robinson, another translator of the same work (Robinson, 1979) and author of a thoughtful essay on the subject (Robinson, 1996), one of the very few that can be described as "literary criticism" of siddha stories.

Building on an idea already voiced by Dowman, Robinson points out in detail that the biographies follow two narrative patterns. The first is simpler and more prevalent. After presenting the siddha-to-be’s name, their often menial occupation/caste, and country of birth (East Indian polities dominate), there occurs a crisis situation which prompts the character to seek the Dharma. The hero of the story is usually a layman, but there are female (Shaw, 1994) and monastic characters as well. To solve the crisis situation, a guru or a deity intervenes, initiating the protagonist into a tantric cult and its teachings. The now initiate hero engages in practice, typically for 12 years, and achieves success. (The names, countries of origin, original occupation/status, gurus, tantras followed, and timespan of reaching siddhi, are tabulated in a helpful chart in Robinson, 1979, 285–288.) The practice they engage in is often related to their former occupation or destructive compulsion, reinterpreted and elevated to allow for a mystical experience.
After having become siddhas, they display miraculous feats, become gurus to others, and finally depart to a tantric otherworld at will. The second type of narrative is more complex, and is usually associated with more famous siddhas. This type includes several episodes, sometimes trials and tribulations, initial failures, and idiosyncratic feats.

The siddhas’ questionable idiosyncratic acts – including eating things beyond ritual purity and general human taste, drinking liquor in excessive quantities, slaughtering animals, and such – almost invariably turn out to be spiritual tests posed to a disciple or a group of people that are to be converted. Some siddhas on the other hand do not challenge the social order, pretending to lead perfectly ordinary lives. Their spiritual status is discovered only “accidentally” by others, who were nevertheless meant to do so on account of their karmic fruition.

Very few such stories survive in the original Sanskrit. The best known example is the “Siddha Biography” manuscript (Isaacson & Sferra, 2014, 60–71, 421–430). A similar, albeit much shorter, narrative exhibiting some of the same tropes, but in which the protagonist is not referred to as a siddha, can be found in Sferra (2000, 73–74). A rather remarkable document in this respect is an inscription from Bodh Gaya, dated to the late 12th century (1183–1192 CE). Here (ed. & trans. in Sanyal, 1929), the donor of a cave temple housing some Buddhist images, one Śrīmitra, is eulogized as “foremost of the class of enlightened Siddhas” (sambuddhasiddhānvayadhurāyabhūtah) and a “great saint” (paramāvadhūtah).

Note, however, that the word anvaya can also be interpreted as “succession,” “lineage,” even “tradition.” He was no doubt seen as a miracle worker, for one of the verses narrates how wild animals became obedient to him when he raised an arm. The eight siddhīs – it is unclear which set the author had in mind – are said to have flocked to him like young women desirous for a husband, but he paid little attention to them and remained faithful to his “wife,” liberation while still alive (jīvanmukti). He is also praised for having converted a number of kings, and the then ruler of Benares, Jayaccandra (r. 1170–1194 CE) is described as his disciple through initiation. In addition, he is praised for having recovered or made popular again a large number of lost or forgotten sacred texts (śastra-grāmādikam magnam).

Dohās

The most common form of literary expression attributed to siddhas is the dohā verse, rhyming couplets written in a kind of late Middle Indic. A collection of such songs was first published by Śāstri in 1916 on the basis of Nepalese palm leaf manuscripts discovered by him about a decade earlier. This pioneering volume included the so-called Caryāgīti collection of various siddhas with the commentary of Muni-datta, the Dohākoṣa of Saraha with the commentary of (an) Advayavajra, the Dohākoṣa of Kāṇha with an anonymous commentary, as well as extracts of Apabhraṃśa passages from the Dākārṇavatāntara. The various reeditions and studies of the following six decades are summarized in Kverne (1977, 9–16; the works of Bagchi, 1935, 1938, and Shahidullah, 1928 merit special attention). More recent studies include Jackson (2004) and Schaefter (2005). On the textual side, some significant improvements were provided to Kāṇha’s Dohākoṣa by an anonymous edition of Amṛṭavajra’s commentary (see Śrīrṣṣa-vajra-pādadohākoṣātiṭā’s commentary).

It was perhaps not without nationalist sentiments that Śāstri advocated the language of the dohās as Old Bengali. Enthusiasm for “Old Bengali” is current even in our days (Moudud, 1992). More cautious authors call it Apabhraṃśa or Eastern Apabhraṃśa, but this too is problematic, inasmuch as the language of the dohās does not conform entirely to any standard Apabhraṃśa, and when it does it is because the verses have been practically rewritten according to rules the originals may not have observed (for example Bhayani, 1997).

Moreover, the songs are for the most part transmitted in Nepalese manuscripts, often fragmentary and quite corrupt. We have only a handful of commentaries surviving in the original Sanskrit, but these too are replete with philological problems, in spite of the not insignificant efforts several scholars have invested into making sense of them. One of the most commonly used of such works, Kverne (1977), employs the commentary of Munidatta, but a closer scrutiny reveals that this exegete’s text is not only very badly transmitted, but that he was not a very bright, well-informed, and precise commentator to begin with. In addition, quite a few of the songs were reconstructed by editors from the commentators’ lemmata and Tibetan translations. Studying the dohā corpus is therefore a formidable philological and linguistic challenge.
The *dohās*’ literary imagery and their doctrinal substrate pose a challenge of equal magnitude. There are various studies on these two subjects, for example, Kværne (1977, 30–64). The songs sometimes have two meanings. The superficial meaning is often mundane and sometimes shockingly antinomian. The deeper meaning always refers to some kind of doctrine, most often elements of tantric practice. For example, one of Kāṇha’s famous songs runs as follows (material from Kværne, 1977, 119–122):

\begin{center}
mārī śāsu nayandā ghareshālī |
mārā mārī Kāṇha bhāilā kabālī ||
\end{center}


Here Middle Indic śāsu is equivalent to both Skt. śvāsā (mother-in-law) and śvāsa (the vital breath), whereas māra corresponds to both Skt. mātr (mother) and māyā (the illusory world of bondage). The doctrinal equivalent of the other two female relatives is somewhat unclear. Munidatta gives us the key to “house,” which he interprets as the Discus (cakra) of Great Bliss, the supreme abode in yogic physiology and also informs us, alluding to a standard etymology, that skull-bearer (kapālīn) means someone who is able to maintain (pāla) bliss (ka). In other words, Kāṇha professes himself as a mass murderer turned penitent skull-bearer only for shock value; the “yogic” interpretation is that he became able to experience Great Bliss only after having done away with the vital breath, the movement of which is inextricably related to conceptualization, the cosmic illusion of bondage in transmigration, and so on. The sometimes shockingly colorful imagery is still a matter of dispute, as illustrated for example by the exchange of Siegel (1981) and Ray (1985), and again Siegel (1985).

Other songs are more straightforward, without any mystical meaning. For example, this is how Saraha criticizes fake tantric yogins (I disregard here the numerous philological problems; slightly corrected text and translation from Jackson, 2004, 55):

\begin{center}
akkhi nivesı asana vandhi
kaṇñhehın khusukhusı jana dhandhi |
randi mundi anna vi vesem
dikkhijāi dakkhina uddesem ||
\end{center}

Fixing his gaze, bound in a posture, he whispers into the ears of rich folk.

For widows and nuns in their special garb, he grants consecration – for a fee.

We have very little information concerning the performative aspect of these songs. They were no doubt sung (commentaries sometimes provide us with the name of the musical scale), perhaps even accompanied by other singers, instruments, and dance (Kværne, 1977, 8). The Newar cacā performances (for an accessible description of this still rather secretive tradition, see e.g. Ahmed, 2003) may preserve many original features (Widdess, 2004).

Other Literature Attributed to Siddhas

The Tibetan Canon preserves scores of works attributed to siddhas. A useful but uncritical survey of such works can be found in Robinson (1979, 289–307). Beyond the already mentioned songs, here we find commentaries, short teachings, treatises, practical manuals, and so forth. One may say that there is virtually no genre of esoteric literature untouched by siddhas. A fair number of these survive in Sanskrit, and there are also works extant which were unnoticed or not translated into Tibetan.

It is usually assumed that siddhas produced nonconformist texts while the monastic environment tried to “tame” these through exegesis. This strictly dichotomous model cannot hold, however, since there is much evidence for siddhas producing commentaries, as witnessed not only by the aforementioned canonical attributions, but by works such as Bhavyakīrti’s *Vīramanorṇamā*, which cites a plethora of varying explanations by authors who, judging by their names, were siddhas (Szántó, 2012, vol. I, 47–48). Moreover, most commentators do not try to “tame” the texts in any way.

Some material attributed to siddhas can also be found in scripturalized form. The *Buddhaka-paṭalatāntra* incorporates one of Saraha’s Apabhraṃśa songs attributing it to a tantra, while Saraha himself is also a commentator of the text (Luo, 2010, xxxiii, 5), whereas the *Sampūṭodbhavatāntra* recycles long passages from Anagāvajra’s *Prajñopāyaviniścayasi* siddhi (as first noted by Noguchi, 1995).
Siddhas are also often portrayed as revealers of tantras and other esoteric teachings. It is noteworthy that the basic practical manuals for the greatest yoginītantra cults were authored by persons identified by the tradition as siddhas: Sarorūha for the Hevajra (Hevajrasādhanapāyikā); Lūyipāda, Ghaṇṭāpāda, and Kṛṣṇācārya for the Cakrasaṃvara (Sugiki, 2000, 45); and Āryadeva for the Catuspīṭha (Szántó, 2012, vol. I, 145–149).

Notwithstanding the relatively large amount of published works and secondary literature based on them, there remains much siddha literature to be examined both in the original Sanskrit/Apabhṛṣṭa and Tibetan translations. There are also many works which inhabit a gray area, that is to say, they are transmitted in Tibetan and although they preserve a large number of features that may point to an Indian original, they are probably not “authentic” compositions (see e.g. Kapstein, 2006, 56–60). Moreover, there is also a thus far unique case, that of the so-called Vanaratna codex (Royal Asiatic Society London, Ms Hodgson 35; Isaacson, 2008), in which works by siddhas have been translated back into Sanskrit from Tibetan. Vanaratna (1384–1468 CE), the presumed author of this multiple text manuscript, also mentions several mahāsiddhas by name, this being one of the very rare occasions where the term is “attested” in Sanskrit.

The fnāṇamālā

One unambiguously Indian text is the fnāṇamālā, a collection of short, usually one-, maximum two-verse siddha teachings preserved in a Nepalese palm-leaf manuscript (National Archives, Kathmandu 4–1171 = NGMPP reel no. A 59/20). The copy is undated; judging by features of paleography, it is probably a product of the second half of the 13th century. The language is not Apabhṛṣṭa, but a somewhat bizarre mix of Middle Indic and Sanskrit, which is occasionally very difficult to make sense of.

The text has three significant historical–philological merits. First, the colophon provides subcontinental hard evidence for the tradition of grouping siddhas into 84 (the numeral used here is corāsi and not the Sanskrit caturasīti). Second, it transmits yet another list and contains in the original the names of many siddhas which are sometimes transmitted garbled in Tibetan (34 matches) or not transmitted at all (there are about 40 such names). Third, most of the siddhas record the names of their masters in what may be called the signature line; therefore, here we have relatively early and original subcontinental testimony for such spiritual connections, which can be compared with information from the Tibetan tradition.

By far the most influential master in this collection is Lūyi (also spelt Lūyi, both forms can have the honorific -pā or -pāya, i.e. Skt. -pāda), closely followed by Viruvā (i.e. Virūpā, the same suffixes can apply, alternative name given in a gloss: Nyāsavīra), Gorakha/Gopāla (never Gorakśa), Macchendra/Minanātha (never Matsyendra), and Lilā. The only female guru referred to unambiguously is Mekhalā. There are three names which seem to have been important for the fnāṇamālā but are completely ignored by the aforementioned Abhayadattaśi: Abhavabhuṭṭi, Sogaḍa/Sogata, and Māhīlā/Māhīlavīra. To give a general idea about the language and contents of the collection, here is an example verse:

svayasamvedanā tatva udesā gurunā vacā
navakāpaniḥmotorā hymomāmāna manamā kuru |
Telo āttamārasiddhāya Māhīlāya prasādanā |
Reality is to be experienced by oneself;
the word of gurus is only a brief outline.
By blocking the nine wells [i.e. the apertures of the body],
make the mind equal the sky in size.
[This is the teaching of] Telo for the purification of the person,
[w]hich was obtained/[is transmitted] by the grace of Māhīla.

A similar, but much shorter, compilation has been published as the Nānāsiddhopadesahā (1994). Here we count 14 siddhas, but it is unclear whether they were seen as a set.

Siddha Iconography

Siddhas are frequently portrayed on various media: cloth paintings, murals, statuary, stone and metal reliefs, as well as book illustrations. (For an overview of names and distinctive iconographical features, see Robinson, 1979, 262–283.) They are represented either as sets or individuals, as well as subordinate figures (e.g. above, near, or around a main deity if they occupy a role in the transmission lineage).
Siddhas are most frequently portrayed with the features of yogins: long hair (disheveled or tied in a topknot), wearing a loin cloth or naked with bone ornaments, wearing the yogic belt, seated on animal skins or corpses but sometimes also hovering or flying, accompanied by a consort and/or disciples/devotees. Some are portrayed as scholarly monks (e.g. Śāntipā), whereas royal figures are represented as wealthy laymen (e.g. Indrabhūti). Some of the more celebrated siddhas are portrayed as if captured in a snapshot, the pose and surroundings evoking one of their famous miracles (e.g. Virūpā pointing at the Sun stopping it in its course or Lūyipā eating fish guts). Again others are presented with implements alluding to their names (e.g. Savaripā, lit. “Hunter outcaste,” with a bow and arrow, or Sarahapā, lit. “He who has cast the arrow,” as a fletcher). A distinctive feature is that they are usually not drawn facing the viewer directly, as in the case of deities. Some siddhas are portrayed in outright grotesque fashion and in this they are similar to the Chinese tradition of depicting →arhats (such as “the 18 arhats”). However, no link between the two traditions has yet been found (Linrothe, 2006a, 24).

Perhaps some of the most splendid siddha representations can be seen in Gyanste, Central Tibet (Tib. Rgyal rtse), for an ample study of which see Schroeder (2006). There are also numerous Tibetan scroll paintings (Skt. pata; Tib. thang ka) of considerable artistic merit. An early Nepalese masterpiece (not later than the beginning of the 12th cent.) depicting siddhas in cremation grounds is analyzed in Sinclair (2014). A fine example of block print depiction is given in Egyed (1984).

It is not known with certainty when and where the codification of iconographical features took place. In this respect, the textual and material evidence from the South Asian heartlands is very thin. At least 17 siddha portrayals are cataloged in an unedited passage of the Kriyāśamuccaya of Jagaddarpana (Nepal, before the mid-13th cent.), but a scroll painting earlier than that author already displays a similar arrangement (Sinclair, 2014, 214).

We see here the features later widely portrayed in Tibetan art: Śabara is carrying a bow and arrow, Vināpada plays the lute, Dhēnki/Dhēngi is pounding rice, Virūpa is drinking liquor binding the Sun to a tavern [table], Dombi is riding a tiger together with his consort, Kambali is spreading a blanket on himself, Kukkuripāda is childishly amusing himself with bitches. (Based on one of the earlier of many witnesses, National Archives Kathmandu 4–123 = NGMPP reel no. B 31/5, fols. 40–41. Unfortunately the passage, which consists of four sragdharā verses, is quite corrupt.)

The Afterlife of Indian Siddha Culture

With the almost complete disappearance of Buddhism from India, the cult of siddhas vanished, too. The only exception on the subcontinent are the Newars centered on the Kathmandu Valley, who preserve not only the iconography but also some of their songs (Newar cacā from Skt. caryā), albeit in a corrupt and for the most part little understood form.

There were many epigon in the Tibetan tradition inheriting the features mentioned above. →Mi la ras pa, Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas (Martin, 2006), Bon personages (K.S. Brown’s descriptions in Linrothe, 2006a, 375–385), or the Bhutanese folk hero ‘Brug pa kun legs (Stein, 1972) are without hesitation identified as siddhas, and even in our days unusual acts of high ranking masters are interpreted as siddha-like behavior (Kapstein, 2006, 60, points out the famous example of Chögyam Trungpa; another example is given in Smith, 2006, 67; →Tibet’s Crazy Yogins). Many Tibetan masters composed their own dohas, adapting the genre to their environment (see Ardussi, 1977).

Tibetans also compiled their own siddha/mahāsiddha lists. The numbers vary greatly (see Smith, 2006), but a particularly popular and early set was one of eight figures (Luczanits, 2006; Jackson, 2006). These are sometimes portrayed one in each of the eight cremation grounds surrounding the central portion of some maṇḍalas from the yogini-tantra class. Some authorities (e.g. Luczanits, 2006, 89) seem to accept that this is done on the authority of an Indian source, namely the Śmaśānavidhi of Lūyipāda, but the reading in question is both metrically and grammatically corrupt. Lūyipāda does teach placing siddhas in the cremation grounds in the same text just one verse before, but they are not in a set of eight and they are not styled “great.”

No genetic link can be demonstrated between siddhas and late medieval or early modern poets such as Kabir (early 15th cent.) or the still active Bāuls of Bengal. The typological resemblances, however, are quite striking: itinerant lifestyle or
keeping to one’s menial labor, expression in songs promoting social critique and nondualistic mystical experiences, and unusual behavior. (For a more optimistic view on this relationship, see Jackson, 2004, 42–48.)

It has been postulated for a very long time that there was a connection between Buddhist siddhas and yogins of what became various Nāth denominations; after all, some of the personages such as Matsyendra, Gorakṣa, and Caurāṇga, as well as famous pilgrimage sites such as Śrīśālām, are venerated by both traditions. However, it is only very recently that evidence started mounting for such a link: most importantly, it seems that the earliest hathayogas texts were created in a tantric Buddhist environment and that these works are linked to the famous Virūpa (see Mallinson, forthcoming).

The charisma and appeal of siddhas, whichever tradition they may hail from, has not diminished. Scores of modern ventures (yoga, alternative medicine, etc.) will meet the reader after a brief search on the World Wide Web.

Bibliography


