

Yoga: An Integral Part of Indian Culture and Heritage

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Abstract

Yoga has its roots in ancient India, with its origins dating back thousands of years. The practice is closely associated with the Indus Valley Civilization and the Vedic period, making it deeply intertwined with the historical and cultural development of the region. Yoga is not just a physical practice; it encompasses a holistic approach to life, including spiritual, mental, and philosophical aspects. It is closely linked to various Indian philosophical systems such as Vedanta, Samkhya, and Tantra. These philosophies emphasize self-realization, consciousness, and the pursuit of higher truths, aligning with many core values of Indian culture. Yoga is often associated with Hinduism and is mentioned in Hindu scriptures like the Bhagavad Gita and the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. It's also practiced within other Indian religious traditions like Buddhism and Jainism. The integration of yoga into religious practices and rituals further solidifies its cultural significance. Yoga's emphasis on physical postures (asana) and breathing techniques promotes overall health and well-being. The practice aims to create harmony between the body, mind, and spirit, aligning with the traditional Indian approach to holistic health. While yoga originates from India, it has gained immense popularity worldwide. Its global reach has helped promote Indian culture and philosophy on an international scale, making it a symbol of India's cultural heritage. Yoga encourages the unity of the individual's physical and mental aspects. This resonates with the Indian concept of mind-body integration, which is deeply rooted in cultural practices like Ayurveda and traditional healing systems. Yoga has been passed down through generations in India, serving as a way to preserve cultural and traditional practices. The transmission of yoga knowledge from teacher to student (guru-shishya parampara) is a cherished aspect of Indian culture.

Keywords- Heritage, Yoga, asana, spiritual, Samadhi.

Introduction: Yoga is an ancient Indian wisdom and it is our cultural and spiritual heritage. Yoga essentially focuses on bringing harmony between body and mind, thought and action; restraint and fulfilment; human and nature; a holistic approach to health and well-being. It is an art and science of healthy living. Yoga is also 'anusāsana' (discipline) which helps to develop overall physical, mental, spiritual, and social aspects of an individual's personality. To accomplish this, it advocates practice of different yogic techniques like Āsana (psycho-physiological postures), Prāṇāyāma (breath regulation techniques), Pratyāhāra (withdrawal of senses) Dhāraṇā (concentration) and Dhyāna (meditation), etc. In modern world, there is a general notion among the masses that Yoga is a series of exercises called āsana and considers it for their physical fitness and wellness. But it is not so. So, one need to understand that Yoga is not just related to physical fitness and wellness movement as it is perceived today, but it is a way to lead a holistic life and to attain enlightenment. There are various schools of Yoga, namely Jñāna-yoga, Bhakti-yoga, Karma-yoga, Pātāñjalayoga and Haṭha-yoga, etc., while āsana is just one limb of Aṣṭāṅga-yoga and Haṭha-yoga.

Etymology of Yoga -The word 'Yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit root Yuj, meaning 'to join' or 'to yoke' or 'to unite'. As per Yogic scriptures, the practice of Yoga leads to the union of an individual consciousness with that of the universal consciousness, Yoga 9 Rationalised 2023-24 156 Knowledge Traditions and Practices of India. Maharishi Patanjali indicating a perfect harmony between the body and mind, human and nature. According to modern scientists, everything in the universe is just a manifestation of the same quantum firmament. One who experiences this oneness of existence is said to be in Yoga, and the practitioner is termed as a yogi, having attained a state of freedom referred to as mukti, nirvana or mokṣa..

Foundations of Yoga -As per the insight of ancient texts, human body is made up of gross body (Sthūlaśarira), subtle body (Sūkṣmaśarira) and the casual body (Kāraṇaśarira). Also there is a mention of five layers (Pañcakoṣas) of existence in Taittīrīya upaniṣad and these are Annamaya (physical), Prāṇamaya (energy), Manomaya (mental), Vijñānamaya (intellectual) and Ānandamaya (blissful) Koṣa. Annamaya makes the structural framework for Sthūlaśari - ra, whereas, Prāṇamaya, Manomaya and Vijñānamaya is for Sūkṣma-śari-ra and Ānandamaya-koṣa for Kāraṇa-śarira.

Annamaya Koṣa or koṣa made of food or the food body : This is the outermost superficial sheath (cover) and is represented by our physical body made up of the five elements and is constituted by the food that we eat. Kriyā, Āsana and Prāṇāyāma helps in the strengthening of this sheath.

Prāṇāyāma Koṣa or the energy body : This is the pranic sheath which energises or invigorates all the other sheaths. It is responsible for all the physiological and mental functions. It is mapped onto the physical body and extends slightly beyond the physical body. Our breath or prāṇa is the bridge between the body and mind. Prāṇāyāma practice strengthens the prāṇayamakoṣa.

Manomaya Koṣa or the mental body : This is the sheath of our thinking, feeling and emotions. It is comprised of manas, ahaṁkāra and the lower buddhi. Prāṇāyāma and Pratyāhāra (control over the senses) practices cater to this koṣa.

Vijñānamaya Koṣa or the wisdom, higher intellect body : This is the region where refined or higher level thinking and intuition starts happening. Meditation practices cater to this sheath.

Ānandamaya Koṣa or the bliss body : This sheath is the closest to our self. Transcending the body, mind and intellect leads to bliss. Meditation is the practice for this sheath.

History and Development of Yoga-The practice of Yoga is believed to have started with the very dawn of civilisation. The science of Yoga originated thousands of years ago, long before the first religious belief systems were born. Yoga believes that suffering is a fact and avidyā (ignorance) is the root cause of all sufferings. Yoga has originated and been developed by ancient Indian rishis to overcome all kinds of suffering of human beings and its root cause. Yogic practices lead to health, harmony and total freedom. The ṛṣis and sages carried this yogic knowledge to different parts of the world including Asia, the Middle East, Northern Africa and South America. Archaeological findings such as Yogi-like figure engraved on soapstone seal verified the existence of Yoga culture which is beyond 5000 years. Thus the history of Yoga

can be traced back to over 5000 years. The history and development of Yoga can be divided into following periods.

Pre-Vedic Period -The history of Yoga can be traced back to pre-vedic period. The study of the history of Indus Valley Civilisation reveals that the practices of Yoga was one of the significant features during that period. Yoga is being widely considered as an ‘immortal cultural outcome’ of Indus Sarasvati Valley Civilisation—dating back to 2700 B.C., it has proved itself catering to both material and spiritual upliftment of humanity. The stones seals excavated from the sites of the Indus Valley Civilisation depicting figures in yogic postures indicated that Yoga was being practised even during 3000 B.C. The idol of Pashupati in yogic postures is one of such specimens.

Vedic and Upanishadic period- This period is marked with the emergence of Vedas. There are four Vedas: (i) Ṛgveda (ii) Sāmaveda (iii) Yajurveda (iv) Atharvaveda During this period, the people relied on the knowledge of dedicated vedic yogis (rishi) to teach them how to live in divine harmony. The ṛṣis (seers) were also gifted with the ability to see the ultimate reality through their intensive spiritual practices. The vedas contain the oldest known yogic teachings called Vedic Yoga. The Upaniṣads are the concluding portion and essence of the Vedas. The Upaniṣads are contained in the knowledge portion of Vedas. The concepts of yoga are widely available in the Upanishads. The Yoga in Upaniṣads describe the inner vision of reality resulting in intense self-inquiry. Jñāna-yoga, Karma-yoga and Dhyāna-yoga are the main outcomes of the Upanishadic teachings.

Classical period-In the pre-classical era, Yoga was an incoherent mixture of various ideas and techniques that often contradicted each other. The classical period is defined by Maharshi Patanjali’s yoga sutras, the first systematic presentation of Yoga. After Patanjali, many sages and Yoga masters contributed greatly for the preservation and development of the field through their well-documented practices and literature. The period between 500 B.C.–A.D. 800 is considered as the Classical period, which is also considered as the most fertile and prominent period in the history and development of Yoga. During this period, commentaries of Vyāsa on Yoga Sūtras and Bhagavad Gītā, etc., came into existence. This period can be mainly dedicated to two great religious teachers of India—Mahavir and Buddha. The concept of five great vows—Pañcamahāvratā by Mahavir and Aṭṭhaṅgika Magga or eightfold path by Buddha can be well considered as early nature of Yogasādhana. We find more explicit explanation of Yoga in Bhagavad Gītā, which has elaborately presented the concept of Jñāna-yoga, Bhakti-yoga and Karma-yoga. These three types of Yoga are still the highest example of human wisdom. Patañjali’s Yoga sūtra besides containing various aspects of Yoga, is mainly identified with the eight fold path of Yoga. Vyasa wrote a very important commentary on Yoga sūtra. During this very period, the aspect of mind was given more importance and it was clearly brought out through Yoga Sādhana. Mind and body both can be brought under control to experience equanimity. Patañjali described ‘eight limbed path’ in order to attain Samādhi or enlightenment. Yama: Social restraints, observances or ethical values • Niyama: Personal observances of study, purity and tolerance. • Āsana: Psycho-physiological postures. • Prāṇāyāma: Control of life force through breath control or regulation • Pratyāhāra: Withdrawal of senses • Dhāraṇā: Concentration • Dhyāna: Meditation • Samādhi: Spiritual absorption.

Yoga in modern period -The period between A.D. 1700–1900 is considered as modern period. This was the time in which great legacy of Yoga teachings was carried forward by prominent Yoga personalities like Ramaṇa Maharṣi, Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa, Paramahansa Yogānanda, Swami Vivekānanda, Swami Dayānanda Sarasvati - and Sri Aurobindo. Their philosophies, traditions, lineages and Guru-śiṣya paramparā led to further the knowledge and practices of different Traditional Schools of Yoga, e.g., Jñānayoga, Bhakti-yoga, Karma-yoga, Rāja-yoga, Haṭha-yoga and Integral-yoga, etc.

Yoga in contemporary period- Now in the contemporary times, everybody has conviction about Yoga practices towards the preservation, maintenance and promotion of health. Yoga has spread all over the world by the teachings of great personalities like Swami Shivananda, Shri T. Krishnamacharya, Swami Kavalayananda, Shri Yogendara, Swami Rama, Maharshi Mahesh Yogi, Pattabhi Jois, B.K.S. Iyengar, Swami Satyananda Sarasvati and the like. In the present scenario, Yoga has been accepted by the world as a boon to prevent lifestyle diseases and for stress management. Given the health problems being at the centre stage of challenges faced by world population, Yoga is considered mainly as a tool of physical and mental well-being. Considering the importance and potential of Yoga in health and well-being, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on 11 December 2014 approved the proposal of the honorable Prime Minister of India, urging the world community to adopt an International Day of Yoga. The 193 members of UNGA approved the proposal by consensus with the record of 177 co-sponsoring countries, a resolution to establish 21st June as International Day of Yoga. This is the biggest recognition for Yoga by world community. On December 1, 2016, UNESCO inscribed Yoga in its list of intangible cultural heritages of humanity. Yoga Sadhana of all hues and colours is considered panacea for a meaningful life and living. Its orientation to a comprehensive health, both an individual and social, makes it a worthy practice for the people of all religions, races and nationalities. Now-a-days, millions of people across the globe irrespective of their age, gender, cost, religion and countries have been benefitted by the practice of yoga which has been preserved and promoted by the great eminent yoga masters from ancient time to this date. Yoga has united the world and brought the whole world under one umbrella to live in peace and harmony. Yoga is considered an integral part of Indian culture and heritage for several interconnected reasons:

1. **Ancient Origins:** Yoga has its roots in ancient India, with its origins dating back thousands of years. The practice is closely associated with the Indus Valley Civilization and the Vedic period, making it deeply intertwined with the historical and cultural development of the region.
2. **Spiritual and Philosophical Significance:** Yoga is not just a physical practice; it encompasses a holistic approach to life, including spiritual, mental, and philosophical aspects. It is closely linked to various Indian philosophical systems such as Vedanta, Samkhya, and Tantra. These philosophies emphasize self-realization, consciousness, and the pursuit of higher truths, aligning with many core values of Indian culture.
3. **Connection to Hinduism and Other Indian Religions:** Yoga is often associated with Hinduism and is mentioned in Hindu scriptures like the Bhagavad Gita and the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. It's also practiced within other Indian religious traditions like Buddhism and Jainism. The integration

of yoga into religious practices and rituals further solidifies its cultural significance.

4. **Physical and Mental Well-being:** Yoga's emphasis on physical postures (asanas) and breathing techniques promotes overall health and well-being. The practice aims to create harmony between the body, mind, and spirit, aligning with the traditional Indian approach to holistic health.
5. **Global Influence:** While yoga originates from India, it has gained immense popularity worldwide. Its global reach has helped promote Indian culture and philosophy on an international scale, making it a symbol of India's cultural heritage.
6. **Unity of Mind and Body:** Yoga encourages the unity of the individual's physical and mental aspects. This resonates with the Indian concept of mind-body integration, which is deeply rooted in cultural practices like Ayurveda and traditional healing systems.
7. **Cultural Preservation:** Yoga has been passed down through generations in India, serving as a way to preserve cultural and traditional practices. The transmission of yoga knowledge from teacher to student (guru-shishya parampara) is a cherished aspect of Indian culture.
8. **Art and Literature:** Yoga has been depicted in Indian art, sculpture, and literature for centuries. Ancient texts, such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana, contain references to yogic practices and their significance.
9. **Festivals and Celebrations:** Yoga is often celebrated during various Indian festivals and events. For instance, International Yoga Day, initiated by the Prime Minister of India, is observed globally on June 21st each year, highlighting the cultural importance of yoga.
10. **Tourism and Cultural Exchange:** Many tourists visit India to learn about its rich cultural heritage, and yoga is often a central part of their experience. Yoga retreats, ashrams, and wellness centers offer visitors the opportunity to immerse themselves in Indian culture through the practice of yoga.
11. **Yoga and Human Values:** Values are the principles that an individual adopts in one's life which describe human behaviour. Values are the desirable ideals and goals, which are intrinsic and when achieved, in fact, evoke a deep sense of fulfilment. Values such as truth, non-violence, peace, love, honesty, generosity and no greed are given highest importance in Yoga. The erosion of human values becomes the primary cause for corruption, terrorist activities, violence, unrest and various complications in the society. Modern education is for bread earning purpose and does not focus on the development of spiritual, moral and ethical values. Indian culture is deeply rooted in spiritual and ethical values; unless these values find their way into the life of students, education will lose its significance and will not fulfil its aim. In order to progress in the spiritual dimension, one has to adopt the following values that go in line with Indian tradition and heritage.
12. **Yoga and Holistic Health :**When we discuss about health, it is not merely the absence of diseases or illness at the physical level but also psychological, emotional, social and spiritual planes. Yoga believes in identifying the root cause of a disease and its elimination at all levels. For the holistic development of overall health, Yoga works at several planes of human being: Physical Āsanas primarily work at the physical level. Those practices tone up the muscles, nerve fibres, enhances blood circulation,

promote the physiological functions and set the internal environment of the body called homeostasis. The Kriyā (cleansing techniques) vitalises the internal organs of the body and restore their efficiency by eliminating the toxic matter from the body. They establish equilibrium between vāta (air), pitta (bile) and kapha (phlegm). To nourish the physical body, a pure balanced wholesome diet with the supplement of nutrients is required. Yogic diet nourishes the body. Yogic food which is often discussed in the ancient text is sātāvika food. Yoga emphasises on mitāhāra, which is related to the quality and quantity of food and also the state of mind during the intake of food. Various āsana or yogic postures also help in physical development. Cognitive or Intellectual Mental development is the growth and change in cognitive processes such as attention, memory, thinking, perceiving and imagination, reasoning and problem-solving. Practising of Yoga including Āsanas, Prāṇāyāma and Yoga nidrā by the students, has been found to improve their memory significantly. Meditation plays a vital role in regulating the speed of thoughts and attains the calm, quiet and relaxing state of mind. Meditation is a key tool to calm down the mind and hence becomes an important key for helping in managing the stress. Emotional Emotions are an integral part of human life. Emotional development can be considered in terms of control and expression of emotion as well as management of relationships with oneself and others. There is always a fight between our likes and dislikes, and positive and negative emotions. Negative emotions are so vibrant in the mind that seldom any positive thought gets sharpened up in our psyche. Some Āsanas, Prāṇāyāma and relaxation techniques are good tools for conditioning the autonomous nervous system. These yogic practices have been found to bring significant positive changes in the emotional states of anxiety, stress, depression, regression, fatigue, guilt, and arousal. Bhakti yoga (unconditional love) is the well accepted method for culturing our emotions and get our mind directed towards accepting the positive emotions. Social Due to isolation, an individual develops varieties of psychosocial complications. Yamas and Niyamas can be important tools for social development. During satsang, one comes near the Guru and acquaints with positive mentors and companions for life. Healthy social contacts, interpersonal relationships make life enjoyable and free from physical and psychological strains. Spiritual Spiritual development takes place in the form of habits, values and ethics, etc. Good habits and strong value system inculcated right from the childhood will have lasting effects on the personality of the child. For spiritual development, yama, niyama, pratyāhāra and dhyāna (meditation) are helpful. Yama and niyama help to develop our moral values while prāṇāyāma and meditation help us to realise our true self. Introspection is very effective for the development of 'self'.

Discussion

The philosophy behind the ancient Indian practice of yoga has influenced various aspects of how society in India functions, whether it be in relation to areas such as health and medicine or education and the arts. Based on unifying the mind with the body and soul to allow for greater mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing, the values of yoga form a major part of the community's ethos. Yoga consists of a series of poses, meditation, controlled breathing, word chanting and other techniques designed to help

individuals build self-realization, ease any suffering they may be experiencing and allow for a state of liberation. It is practised by the young and old without discriminating against gender, class or religion and has also become popular in other parts of the world. Traditionally, yoga was transmitted using the Guru-Shishya model (master-pupil) with yoga gurus as the main custodians of associated knowledge and skills. Nowadays, yoga ashrams or hermitages provide enthusiasts with additional opportunities to learn about the traditional practice, as well as schools, universities, community centres and social media. Ancient manuscripts and scriptures are also used in the teaching and practice of yoga, and a vast range of modern literature on the subject available.

Conclusion

The philosophy behind the ancient Indian practice of yoga has influenced various aspects of how India's society functions, from health and medicine to education and the arts. Based on unifying the mind with the body and soul for greater mental, spiritual and physical well being, it consists of a series of poses, meditation, controlled breathing, word chanting and other techniques. Traditionally transmitted from master to pupil, nowadays yoga ashrams, hermitages, educational institutions and community centres also help to transmit the practice. In modern era "it is practised by the young and old without discriminating against gender, class or religion" and "consists of a series of poses, meditation, controlled breathing, word chanting and other techniques designed to help individuals build self-realization, ease any suffering they may be experiencing and allow for a state of liberation". In 2014 the United Nations proclaimed 21 June as International Yoga Day.

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