

Conceptualizing Bhartiya Yoga in Global Context**¹Aakriti Thakur, ²Prof. Anita Jain**

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Abstract

All the civilizations nurture, nourish and promote their respective cultures in their laps, yearn to produce some or the other vertical which may leave an eternal imprint on the sands of time. In the process, it is a general tendency that a select group of ideas are crystalized to form such a vertical and these verticals are expressed through the oral narrative traditions, or written textual traditions or some ritualistic practices, or, a combination of some or all of these.

Bharat has been the cradle of civilization and is the only nation which can boast of an incessant flow of its oral, written, theoretical and practical traditions ever since the beginning of time. It has contributed numerous ideas which have shaped the civilizations in myriad forms and through different expressions of these esoteric as well as exoteric concepts. Yoga is one such concept which has been revered as one of the principle philosophical schools of Bharat and which is a living tradition even today as has been proclaimed by the UNESCO as the International Yoga Day on 21st of June every year since the year 2015.

In this paper, an attempt will be made to examine the contributions of Bharat to the world in general and that of Yoga in particular by critical study and analysis of primary texts (Yogasutra of Patanjali, Hathyoga Pradipika etc.), secondary sources, national and international websites (such as Ministry of Ayush, UNESCO etc.) and so on. Also, one of the objectives of this research paper is to showcase the entire concept of Bharatiya Yoga Tradition, as the present-day global discourse is rather restricted to the Asana-s and practice of meditation only; whereas, as a comprehensive concept, the Yoga is an eight-layered process, the ultimate aim of which is Samadhi, which eventually leads the practitioner or yogi towards Kaivalya (or liberation). So, at the concept level, it helps the integration of this discipline with other streams of Indic knowledge traditions. Towards the end, the relevance of yogic practices as they are observed in the spiritual and the mundane traditions will also be attempted.

Keywords: Bharat, Yoga, International Yoga Day, UNESCO, Indian Knowledge System

The Holisticity of Indic Culture

Culture defines the behavioural patterns of the humans and communities and the way they interact with each other. While some of these behaviour patterns are innate, a significant portion is learned through interactions with the surrounding environment, often without the stakeholders being consciously aware of this interaction, as they have imbibed these patterns so well, that these constitute the very part of their existence. Culture also embodies the

shared beliefs, values, and practices that guide a society's actions, encompassing both overt behaviours and the underlying motivations that drive them. Moreover, culture is not merely a consequence of human actions but also a powerful force that influences them, leading to the creation of artifacts, social norms, and ideas, that characterize a particular society.

The culture of India (or the Bharatiya Sanskriti) is characterized by its enduring continuity and the harmonious integration of diverse ideas. This is reflected in its rich knowledge tradition, which seamlessly blends the worldly and the spiritual perspectives. From philosophy and religion to art and science, these diverse subjects form the foundation of a culture, which is Bharatiya in its outlook and essence; and in its experiences and expressions. One of the hallmarks of this great culture is the vital link that exists between the theoretical knowledge (shastra) and its practical application (prayoga); in all aspects of human life, highlighting the importance of both intellectual understanding and experiential wisdom. With the help of this phenomenon, the Bharatiya Sanskriti attains a unique place in the realm of cultures. As the oldest living civilization, it has made significant contributions to the world in various fields, which have shaped the course of world history, including mathematics, language & literature, medicine, philosophy, and spirituality. As Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, a renowned art historian and philosopher, has stated that 'each race contributes something essential to the world civilization in the course of its own self-expression and self-realization. The essential contribution of India, then, is simply her Indianness; her great humiliation would be to substitute or to have substituted for this own character (*svabhava*) a cosmopolitan veneer, for then indeed she must come before the world empty-handed¹', meaning it would be a significant loss for Bharat to abandon its '*Bharatiyata*' in favour of a globalized outlook, as it would then have nothing distinctive to offer to the world. To support this argument, some notable contributions of Bharat to the world could be enumerated as given ahead which have a direct bearing with the concept of Yoga and its manifold development – Vedic corpus, Paninian grammar and philosophy of language, the concept of zero, decimal system, the concept of infinity, trigonometry, Concepts of Bhakti, Philosophy & Spirituality, Indian classical music, and architecture etc.

Bharat: The Global Contributions

- Vedic Corpus – The age-old tradition of Vedic recitation has been a hallmark of Indic civilizational discourse. The Vedic corpus has been handed down from one generation to the other through the Guru-Shishya Parmapara since ages. It has been inscribed in the list of representative elements of the UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage in the year 2008².
- Paninian grammar and philosophy of language – Acharya Panini (between the 7th and the 4th century BCE) was a great linguist who through his approximately 4000 Sutras (aphorisms), provided a unique structure to the Sanskrit language making it extremely scientific and productive to study and explore. Alongside, there has been a rich

¹ Coomaraswamy, Ananda K., 'The Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Indian Essays', Oriental Book Company, New Delhi, 2023, p.21

² <https://ich.unesco.org/> (Official website of UNESCO)

tradition of dialectics which helped in propounding and expansion of concepts of hermeneutics, phonetics and semantics.

- The concept of Zero - In the classical period of Indian mathematics, important contributions were made by scholars like Aryabhata, Brahmagupta, Bhaskaracharya, Varahamihira and Madhavacharya etc. The concept of zero, which is fundamental to modern mathematics, is believed to have originated in Bharat.
- The concept of Infinity - the concept of infinity can be traced in the philosophical principle of Shunyavada by Nagarjuna and later on, by mathematicians like Aryabhata.
- The decimal number system - Indian mathematicians also developed the decimal number system.
- Trigonometry - Indian mathematicians made significant contributions to the development of trigonometry, including the sine and cosine functions. The Baudhayana Sulbasutra well predates the theorem propounded by the Greek mathematician Pythagoras.
- Bhakti tradition – The unique tradition of Bhakti is again an exclusively Indic concept which has its roots in the Yogic philosophy.
- Buddhism & Jainism – Bharat has given rise to two major belief systems namely the Jainism and the Buddhism. Jainism is the third major faith of India and is based on the principles of non-violence (ahimsa). Buddhism is more pervasive in terms of its spread, originated in India. It is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who is also known as the Buddha, across the globe.
- Indian Philosophy & Spirituality - It is based on the belief in karma, reincarnation, and the goal of achieving moksha, or liberation from the cycle of rebirth. India's contributions to the world continue to inspire and influence people even today.
- Indian classical music - The musical tradition of India is unique in the world and it derives its roots from the Sama chanting. Be it the soulful vocal or the sonorous instrumental, the land of Bharat has given rise to a rich tradition of music, which attain importance with reference to the development of the Yogic concepts.
- Indian architectural traditions – The various aspects of Indic architecture have given certain fundamental principles of construction of mega structures as well as minute icons, which fructify in the manifestation of the Yogic concepts.

Bharatiya tradition of Yoga

Indian culture is characterized by its enduring continuity and the harmonious integration of diverse ideas. This is reflected in its rich knowledge tradition, which seamlessly blends worldly and spiritual perspectives. From Dharma and philosophy and from art to the sciences, these diverse subjects form the foundation of Bharatiya Sanskriti and Sabhyata. Yoga has been an integral part of Indian culture since time immemorial. It is a discipline that offers spiritual enlightenment. While its exact origins are difficult to pinpoint, evidence of its practice can be traced back to the dawn of civilization. The mention of sages attaining divine knowledge through meditation serves as a testament to the rich and ancient tradition of yoga. Beyond India, yoga has spread its influence to Asia, Africa, Europe, and even the Americas. It represents a unique facet of Indian thought that has seamlessly integrated theory and practice

since ancient times. Vedic and Upanishadic literature, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism, the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, philosophical systems, Buddhist and Jain traditions, Tantric practices, and folk customs all bear witness to the pervasive presence of yoga.

The Indian way of life emphasizes the importance of a healthy body and mind for human well-being, and yoga is recognized as the supreme means to achieve this. It offers benefits not only on an individual level but also at the societal, national, and global levels. The Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads extensively discuss yoga practices. The Upanishads, the bedrock of Indian philosophical and spiritual thought, provide detailed descriptions of the various forms, distinctions, types, and methods of yoga.

India has a rich historical tradition of both the theoretical and practical aspects of yoga. The seeds of yoga can be traced back to the Vedas. The word 'yoga' is used in various contexts in the Rig Veda³, including union, control of horses, attainment of the unattainable, control of the senses, peace, worship of deities, austerity, and self-control etc. While yoga is not explicitly described as a means to attain liberation in the Rig Veda, it is considered an excellent means of acquiring knowledge. Apart from the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, Atharva Veda, Shatapatha Brahmana, and Taittiriya Aranyaka also mention the word 'yoga.' In some places, the word 'yoga' used in these texts signifies samadhi, skill, and practice.

Types of Yoga

Therefore, various philosophical systems have described numerous types of yoga based on the practitioner's capacity and inclination, such as Jnana Yoga (Sankhya Yoga), Karma Yoga (Nishkama Yoga), Bhakti Yoga, Sahaja Yoga, Mantra Yoga (Japa Yoga), Kundalini Yoga, Prem Yoga, Raja Yoga, Abhyasa Yoga, Dhyana Yoga, Laya Yoga, Shunya Yoga, and Nada Yoga. Despite this diversity, all forms of yoga ultimately lead the practitioner towards self-knowledge, which is a crucial step towards the ultimate goal of Indian knowledge, namely, liberation, i.e., moksha or kaivalya. The various forms and practices of yoga are presented as means to attain that supreme state of bliss. Alongside these schools, there are also significant Yogic traditions of the Jains, the Buddhists, and the Kashmiri Trika Philosophy.

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (The Patanjala Yoga)

Although yoga has been interpreted in numerous ways throughout Indian literature, the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali are considered the first independent, authoritative and systematic text on the yoga philosophy. It talks about the three kinds of Yoga – the Sahaja (for the Uttama or supreme), the Kriya (for the Madhyama or middle) and the Ashtanga Yoga (for the Samanya or commoners), as per the capabilities of the seeker. The eight-limbed path of yoga described in the Yoga Sutras has been established as the standard, and other texts have elaborated on it. Yoga, as a means of self-realization, is associated with the human body, speech, mind, intellect, and spiritual consciousness.

³ Rig Veda, 1/34/9, 7/67/8, 3/27/ 11

The Eightfold Path of Yoga (Ashtanga Yoga)

Yogasutra, composed by Maharshi Patanjali, is the most authentic text on Yoga philosophy. There are 195 sutras in Patanjali Yogasutra which are divided in four chapters viz. (i) Samadhi (ii) Sadhana (iii) Vibhuti (iv) Kaivalya. Many important commentaries are available on these, among which Yogasutra Vyasabhashya, Vartika by Vigyanbhikshu, Tattvavaishardi commentary by Vachaspati Mishra, Bhojavritti by Bhojdeva, Maniprabha commentary by Ramananda Yati etc., are particularly famous ones. A critical aspect of understanding Yoga in its entirety is recognizing that it is not merely a set of physical exercises or postures. Rather, it is a comprehensive, multi-layered discipline aimed at the integration of the mind, body, and spirit. As Patanjali's Yoga Sutras suggest, the ultimate goal of Yoga is not simply physical health but spiritual liberation, or Kaivalya⁴. This process is encapsulated in the Ashtanga Yoga⁵ or Eightfold Path, which consists of:

- i. **Yama**⁶ - Ethical disciplines or moral restraints (e.g., non-violence, truthfulness).
- ii. **Niyama**⁷ - Observances or positive duties (e.g., cleanliness, contentment).
- iii. **Asana**⁸ - Physical postures.
- iv. **Pranayama** - Breath control and regulation.
- v. **Pratyahara** - Withdrawal of the senses.
- vi. **Dharana**⁹ - Concentration or focused attention.
- vii. **Dhyana**¹⁰ - Meditation.
- viii. **Samadhi**¹¹ - Union with the divine or spiritual liberation.

These steps are designed not only to improve physical health but also to cultivate mental clarity, emotional balance, and spiritual insight. While many contemporary discussions around Yoga focus primarily on asana (the physical postures) and meditation, it is crucial to understand Yoga as a full spectrum practice that addresses both the mundane and spiritual aspects of existence.

Hatha Yoga

Hatha Yoga, a spiritual practice rooted in ancient Indian traditions, is believed to have originated from the Supreme Being and is considered a divine practice. God Shiva (Adinatha)

⁴ Feuerstein, Georg, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: A New Commentary, Shambhala, 2008, p. 89.

⁵ यमनियमासिप्राणायामप्रत्याहारधारणाध्यासिसमाधयोऽष्टावङ्गानि (Yoga Sutra, 2/29)

⁶ अनर्हिंसा सत्यास्तेयब्रह्मचर्यापररग्रहा यमः । (Yoga Sutra, 2/30)

⁷ शौचसिंतोषतपाः स्वाध्यावेश्वरप्रणधानि नियमाः । (Yoga Sutra, 2/32)

⁸ स्थिरसुखमासिम् । (Yoga Sutra, 2/46)

⁹ देशबन्धनित्तस्य धारणा । (Yoga Sutra, 3/1)

¹⁰ तत्र प्रत्ययैकता ध्याम् । (Yoga Sutra, 3/2)

¹¹ तदेवांमात्रनिर्ासिं स्वरूपशून्यनमव समानधाः । (Yoga Sutra, 3/3)

is revered as the first teacher of this practice¹². Historically, Hatha Yoga is primarily described as a practice centred on controlling the breath. Early references can be found in the Guhyasamajatantra¹³. After Shiva, Guru Matsyendranath¹⁴ is considered the most significant human guru in this lineage. Other notable figures like Gorakhnath, Jalandhar Nath, and Chaturangi Nath also contributed to the propagation of this yogic practice.

While there is found evidence of the existence of the Hatha Yoga school even before Guru Matsyendranath and Guru Gorakhnath (as seen in the case of sage Markandeya), Gorakhnath's teachings brought a unique dimension to the tradition, though it remained rooted in the ancient lineage. Hatha Yoga can be divided into two main phases -

Pre-Gorakhnath - This tradition, influenced by Markandeya Rishi, adhered closely to the eight limbs of yoga as outlined by Patanjali. The Siddhasiddhanta Sangraha¹⁵ provides a detailed account of this tradition.

1. **Post-Gorakhnath** - This tradition, as detailed in the Goraksha Shataka, focuses on six limbs of yoga, excluding Yama and Niyama. The primary goal of this practice is to purify the body (shatkarma) and gradually attain physical lightness, detachment and self-realization.

In essence, Hatha Yoga, from its divine origins to its practical applications, has evolved over centuries, with various masters contributing to its rich and diverse traditions.

The Nath Sampradaya, a lineage of yogis, played a crucial role in popularizing Hatha Yoga. Yogis like Matsyendranath and Gorakhnath made significant contributions to the development and dissemination of this practice. While both phases shared commonalities, the post-Gorakhnath phase introduced unique elements to Hatha Yoga, shaping it into the present practice of Yoga.

Several modern Indian and western yoga masters have played pivotal roles in popularizing yoga globally. Here are a few of the most influential figures¹⁶:

1. **Paramahansa Madhavdas** (1798–1921) was a sadhaka and yoga guru in the 19th century. He travelled across the country on foot for nearly 35 years for knowledge

¹² आनदिः सवेषां निमित्तं प्रिमाः, ततो निमित्तसम्प्रदायाः प्रवृत्त
इतन् निमित्तसम्प्रदानयौ वदस्व। Hajari Prasad Dwivedi Granthavali, Vol.
6, p 19

¹³ दशां तु कृतेऽप्येवं साधकस्य नि जायते।

यदा नि सद्भ्यते बोनधहाठयोगे नि साधयेत् ॥ Guhyasamajatantra, 18/162

¹⁴ निधा ह्य स्यादेकस्तु गोरक्षानदसुसाधकैः ।

अन्यो मृकण्डपुत्रादौः सानधतो हठसिंज्ञकाः ॥ Yoganka, Gitapress
Gorakhpur, 2023, p. 109

¹⁵ Siddhasiddhanta Sangraha, 2/49

¹⁶ <https://yoga.ayush.gov.in/> (Ministry of Ayush, GOI)

of the practice of yoga. His notable disciple includes Swami Kuvalayananda and Shri Yogendra.

2. **Ramakrishna Paramhansa** (1836-1886) was a devotee of the goddess Kali, but adhered to various religious practices from the traditions of Vaishnavism, Shaktism, and Advaita Vedanta. His chief disciple Swami Vivekananda popularized his ideas and philosophy in India and the West.
3. **Swami Vivekananda** (1863-1902) was a key figure in the introduction of Vedanta Philosophy and Kriya Yoga across the world. He is credited with raising interfaith awareness and bringing Yoga to the status of a major philosophy and practice in the late 19th century. While not primarily a yoga teacher, Swami Vivekananda played a crucial role in introducing Indian philosophy and spirituality to the West. His lectures and writings helped to create a greater awareness of yoga and its potential benefits.
4. **Sri Aurobindo** (1872 –1950) was an Indian philosopher, yogi, maharishi, poet and Educationalist. At Pondicherry, he developed a spiritual practice he called Integral Yoga. The Life Divine, which deals with the philosophical aspect of Integral Yoga, Synthesis of Yoga, which deals with the principles and methods of Integral Yoga and Savitri: A legend and Symbol etc., are his most famous literary works.
5. **Mirra Alfassa** (1878-1973) was a French-Indian spiritual guru, yoga teacher, and a collaborator of Sri Aurobindo, who considered her to be of equal yogic stature to him and called her by the name "The Mother". She founded the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and established the town of Auroville.
6. **T. Krishnamacharya** (1888-1989) - Often referred to as the 'Father of Modern Yoga' for his wide influence on the development of postural yoga, Krishnamacharya was a highly influential teacher, who developed a unique approach to yoga that incorporated various styles and catered to individual needs. His teachings have significantly impacted the evolution of modern yoga. Krishnamacharya's students included many of yoga's most renowned and influential teachers, like Indra Devi, K. Pattabhi Jois, B. K. S. Iyengar, his son T. K. V. Desikachar, Srivatsa Ramaswami and A. G. Mohan.
7. **Swami Sivananda** (1887-1963), a prominent figure in the 20th century, established the Divine Life Society and emphasized the importance of yoga for overall well-being, including physical, mental, and spiritual health. His teachings have influenced numerous yoga practitioners and teachers worldwide.
8. **Paramahansa Yogananda** (1893 -1952), a celebrated disciple of Lahiri Mahashaya and Mahavatara Baba, was an Indian-American yogi and guru who introduced millions to meditation and Kriya Yoga through his organization, Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) / Yogoda Satsanga Society (YSS) of India. He was the chief disciple of Swami Sri Yukteshvara Giri and was immigrated to US to prove the unity between Eastern and Western faith and to preach a balance between Western material growth and Indian spirituality. He published his Autobiography of a Yogi in 1946 which has been considered as one of the most significant philosophical books across the globe.

9. **Gopinath Kaviraja** (1887-1976) was an Indian scholar of Sanskrit, Tantra, philosophy, an Indologist, and a great Sadhaka par excellence.
10. **Indra Devi or Eugenie Peterson** (1899-2002) was the first woman to study under the yoga guru Krishnamacharya at the Mysore Palace, alongside B.K.S Iyengar and K. Pattabhi Jois who went on to become yoga gurus. Moving to China, she taught the first yoga classes in that country.
11. **Swami Lakshman Joo** (1907-1991) was a mystic and scholar of Kashmir Shaiva Darshan and a disciple of Swami Ram. He founded the Ishwar Ashram Trust in Srinagar and as a Yogi he expounded the precepts of this great philosophical school to the world.
12. **Krishna Pattabhi Jois** (1915-2009), another prominent student of Krishnamacharya, is credited with popularizing Ashtanga Yoga, a vigorous and dynamic style known for its challenging sequences of postures.
13. **B. K. S. Iyengar** (1918-2014), a renowned student of Krishnamacharya, developed Iyengar Yoga, which emphasizes precise alignment, the use of props, and a therapeutic approach to yoga. His teachings have been instrumental in making yoga accessible to people with diverse physical limitations.
14. **Dhirendra Brahmachari** (1924-1994) was an Indian yoga teacher of Yogi Bhajan, who taught Kundalini Yoga in the Western world. He has Vishwayatan Yogashram in the centre of Delhi to his credit, now known as the Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga.
15. **Swami Rama** (1925-1996) was an Indian Yoga guru, who moved to the US, initially teaching yoga at the YMCA, and founding the Himalayan Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy in Uttar Pradesh and later in Illinois and Pennsylvania.

These are just a few of the many Indian yoga masters who have contributed to the global spread and evolution of yoga. Their teachings and legacies continue to inspire and influence yoga practitioners worldwide.

Yoga in Global Discourse: Beyond Asanas and Meditation

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Yoga has gained immense popularity worldwide. However, much of the discourse around Yoga in the West has focused primarily on its physical aspects, particularly asanas, and meditation. While these elements are important, they represent only a fraction of the full Yoga tradition. In this sense, the global understanding of Yoga risks reducing it to a physical fitness regimen, overlooking the ethical, mental, and spiritual dimensions that are integral to its original form. To illustrate this, the celebration of International Yoga Day by UNESCO on June 21st each year highlights the global appeal of Yoga, yet often emphasizes its physical and health benefits. The integration of Yoga into daily life and its philosophical underpinnings are, however, often less emphasized in the mainstream global discourse.¹⁷

Yoga remains a living tradition, deeply interwoven with various aspects of daily life, spirituality, and even politics. For instance, the practice of Yoga is an integral part of many

¹⁷ <https://ayush.gov.in/> (Ministry of Ayush, GOI, 2022)

spiritual and religious practices in India, as well as in educational systems, where students are taught both the physical postures and the spiritual teachings of the Yoga. The Yoga tradition in India is therefore not just a practice but a way of life that connects individuals to their spiritual roots and to the world around them.

The Relevance of Yoga Today

Yoga has profound relevance in today's world, where individuals are increasingly seeking ways to cope with the pressures of modern life, including stress, anxiety, and physical ailments. The physical benefits of Yoga, including increased flexibility, strength, and overall health, are widely recognized. However, its mental and spiritual benefits – such as improved concentration, inner peace, and a deeper connection to one's self – are equally significant. In both mundane and spiritual contexts, Yoga provides tools for individuals to navigate the complexities of life. In its mundane dimension, the practice of Yoga involves a rigorous corporeality which builds up the physical strength and provides a sustainable substratum to the potential awakening of the self. In the realm of spirituality, it offers a path to self-realization and liberation from suffering.

योगो युक्ति समाधानमष्टाङ्गश्च षडङ्गकिः । क्रियायोगिः
तपश्चर्या युतयोगो महेश्वरिः ॥¹⁸

that is, Yoga can variously be described as Yukti, Samadhi, Ashtanga, Shadanga, Kriya and Tapascharya and all these verticals merge in Mahesvara, who is the embodiment of all these and more.

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¹⁸ Thakur, Aakriti, Sharma, Yogesh, 'Bhartiya Yogadrishti: Parampara evam Vikasa (Patanjala Yoga ke vishesh sandarbha mein)', Kalakalpa, Vol 8, No. 2, 2024, p. 194

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