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The Revival of Yoga in Contemporary India

Suzanne Newcombe

Summary

The word yoga refers to a multifaceted array of beliefs and practices. Yoga is twinned with *sāṃkhya* as one of the six orthodox *darshanas* (worldviews) of Hindu philosophy, with Patañjali's *Yogaśāstra* having been codified by around the fifth century of the Common Era. A distinct body of texts known as the *hathayoga* corpus appears around the 11th century and emphasizes physical practices most likely used by ascetic communities. The ultimate aim of yoga is described by various words (e.g., *kaivalya*, *samādhi*, *mokṣa*, etc.); it is often described as an experience of an individual soul's uniting with the divine, and/or becoming liberated from the material world. These historical precedents have continuities with contemporary yoga practices, and for many Indians today, yoga is understood as the essence of Indian spirituality.

Yoga, however, took on new meanings in the late colonial period, becoming a mental, physical, and ethical discipline to aid in the struggle for an independent Indian nation state; a scientific, evidence-based practice to improve health and well-being; and a template for the evolution of an individual as well as humanity as a whole. At the same time, yoga kept an association with liberation and the realization of the ultimate nature of reality.

In the early 21st century, all these meanings remain current in the Indian context, where yoga is continuing to experience a revival. In India, yoga is understood as a unique and valuable cultural resource that has the potential to revitalize both an individual's health and the Indian nation-state, being an exemplar of the unique

insights that Indian traditions can give to the rest of the world. Despite a notable shift in what is understood by yoga in the modern period, yoga continues to be a multivalent and increasingly popular practice in contemporary India.

Keywords

yoga, yog, asana, pranayama, AYUSH, naturopathy, physical culture, Indian nationalism, swadeshi, swaraj

Yoga in Premodern India

In order to understand the idea of a *yoga* revival in contemporary India, a brief overview of “yoga” in the premodern and colonial periods is important. Many of the historical antecedents have continuities with contemporary practices, and the major historical texts are frequently referenced in order to authenticate them.

Evidence of ascetic practices for meditation and concentration, which are associated with yoga in the modern period, date to the period of the Guatama Buddha; various understandings of yoga are also presented in the Mahābhārata.¹ A variety of similar meditative techniques were developed among Jains, Buddhists, and other non-Brahmanic mendicant groups well before the common era.² In India, ascetics may hold a posture for long periods of time, for example, holding an arm up or standing on one leg for years, hanging upside down on a tree, as *tapas*, a challenging practice done to achieve spiritual insight, gain supernatural powers, and/or as penance. These practices of *tapas* (sometimes associated with yoga) are documented in the Mahābhārata and in the first reports of European travelers to India, and continue to be observed in contemporary India.³

Patañjali's *Yogaśāstra* (the sutras and their commentary) is a work of Sanskrit aphorisms that was codified between 300 and 500 CE. This text has become a central reference point for the contemporary yoga revival, with many current practitioners referring back to it to explain the nature and goals of their practice.⁴ In general, academic scholarship closely associates Patañjali with dualistic *sāṃkhya* philosophy, which holds that consciousness (*puruṣa*) can be experienced as unfettered by the empirical world (*prakṛti*). The *Yogaśāstra* outlines eight parts of a practice *aṣṭāṅgayoga* (eight-limbed yoga), which has the goal of experiencing a complete cessation of the fluctuations of the mind and the ultimate nature of reality. The first "limb" is *yama*, ethical disciplines, which include specific directives toward nonviolence (*ahimsā*), truthfulness (*satya*), not stealing (*asteya*), celibacy/controlled sexuality (*brahmacharya*), and not having more possessions than necessary (*aparigraha*). While the *yamas* are concerned with the relationship between individual and society, the second "limb," *niyama*, consists of instructions for an individual's self-discipline. The *niyama* are broken down into cleanliness (*śauca*), contentment (*santoṣa*), austerities (*tapas*), study of the self (*svādhyāya*), and *Īśvarapraṇidhāna*, which is understood as a practice of devotion to "Lord," or *puruṣa*, and later taking the meaning "God" (*Brahman*). The third limb is that of posture (*āsana*) and the fourth is of controlled breathing (*prāṇāyāma*). The final "limbs" described by Patañjali are (5) withdrawal of the sense organs from external objects (*pratyāhāra*), (6) concentration on an object (*dhāra*), (7) concentration without an external object (*dhyāna*), and (8) the goal of yoga, that is, absorption of the individual with the ultimate reality (*samādhi*). This schema is referenced continually in the presentation of yoga in contemporary India.

Much of Patañjali's text describes and sometimes warns against the development of *siddhis*, or supernatural powers, which may develop with the practices, and could distract the practitioner from the ultimate goal of *samādhi*. Possible siddhis include the power of changing size, becoming invisible, levitating, entering another's body, or becoming physically immortal.⁵ Belief in the possibility of yogis and ascetics having access to these powers contributes to a continuing social ambiguity toward the figure of the traditional yogi.⁶

Contemporary teachers of yoga have selectively emphasized various aspects described in the *Yogaśāstra*, sometimes arguing that the entire eight-limbed path can be accessed by an intense focus on parts of the path. Additionally, many contemporary practitioners of yoga have read the *Yogaśāstra* with lenses assuming a nondual nature to reality (based on *Advaita Vedānta*) and *bhakti* (devotion to God), which became more dominant soteriologies in India after the codification of the *yogaśāstra*.

Also in the second half of the first millennium, yoga became associated with tantric sectarian groups, most often Śaivite, but related practices also can be found in Buddhist, Jain, and other texts. Tantric practices are usually associated with a focus on self-divination through the use of mantra, sometimes including a variety of deliberately transgressive practices and rituals, which could help the practitioner towards liberation and develop occult powers.⁷ From the 8th to 10th centuries, tantric practice increasingly focused on techniques relating to achieving liberation (*mokṣa*) through activating a series of energetic centers (*cakras* or *padma*) and channels (*nāḍī*) within the body through a series of meditation, breathing, and mantra practices.⁸ In this milieu, there begins to appear the image of the goddess *Kundalinī*, imagined as a

snake dwelling in the lowest chakras, who must be induced to climb up the spine to the highest chakras to facilitate liberation.

From the 7th century onward, similar practices, glossed as **tantric** yoga, were promoted amongst both Śaivites and Buddhists with the aims of promoting health, longevity, and physical immortality in association with the aims of spiritual liberation.⁹ Sometimes these practices involved sexual activity and later the use of mercury-based elixirs. In the South of India, tantric practices are associated with the Cittar/Siddha teachers of Triumūlar and Bogar, while in North India, they are associated with the “Nāth” teachers of Matsyendra and Gorakh.¹⁰ Claims for continuity with these lineages and ideas resurface in contemporary yoga milieus.

Transgressive **tantric** practices have always been socially marginal; while many of those contributing to the revival of yoga in modern India sought to minimize the associations of yoga with tantra, others found them inspiring.¹¹ The conflation of yoga with tantra has contributed to widespread Indian associations of morally ambivalent and potentially dangerous yogis, which continues as a narrative in contemporary India.¹²

Complex physical postures (*āsana*) became associated with techniques leading to *mokṣa* and *siddhis* in Sanskrit texts from the 11th century onward; this body of practice is known as *hatha yoga* and is associated with a variety of populations and metaphysical systems. In this corpus of texts, specific breathing techniques (*prānāyāma*) are associated with “locks” in the physical body (*bandhas*), “seals” (*mudrās*), and cleansing techniques (*kriyā*). In this literature, the *circa* 15th-century *Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā* holds a central reference place, codifying previous literature on these subjects and serving as a point of reference for many later texts.¹³ Many contemporary yoga practitioners also refer back to the translated and reprinted *hatha*

yoga texts for authority. Over the centuries, fixed physical postures (*āsana*) increased in importance in this literature; by the 19th century, a canonical number of 84 *āsana* had been established.¹⁴ Academic explorations of these texts and their relationship to more contemporary forms of yoga is ongoing.¹⁵

Yogis in Mughal and Colonial India

A particular group of ascetics, claiming lineage from the figure of Gorakhnāth, gained in prominence in this milieu and has become the only group of self-identifying yogis with a continuous presence in India from the 12th or 13th centuries to the 21st, transmitting their tradition with a *guru-śiṣya* initiation ritual. Known as yogis, Nāth Yogis, or Nāth Siddhas, they are found largely in northwestern India and historically had a reputation for supernatural powers and military ability.¹⁶ They have historically documented relationships with kings and Mughal rulers alike; rulers granted land to Nāth orders in exchange for esoteric knowledge and military alliances. From the 14th to the 16th centuries, *yogi* was also a term that could refer to any number of militarized ascetics or mercenaries, as well as to the well-organized and powerful Nāth organization.¹⁷ Yogis competed in the mystical marketplace with Sufi mystics, known as fakirs, and the two terms became interchangeable in travelogues of the early modern period. These yogis are often described as *naga*, or “naked,” and are reputed to possess supernatural powers of alchemy and prophecy.¹⁸

It is clear that in the colonial period, yoga and yogis were regarded with contempt by colonial agents and missionaries. Nāth alliances with princely states made it difficult for the British trade agents and colonial administrations to establish successful trade networks and governance structures. Therefore, the British agents

enacted both military and propaganda attacks against these groups, branding them “vagrants and criminals.”¹⁹

Several authors have emphasized how the British intervention in the social order of India removed these ascetic orders from royal patronage, forcing these populations post hoc to become the begging vagabonds described by colonial officials.²⁰ European travelogues and missionary accounts further marginalized these populations and branded their displays of physical techniques as immoral and the practitioners thus in need of Christian salvation.²¹ As Mark Singleton has explained, the pioneers of the contemporary yoga revival in India “had to contend with a deep-seated, inherited attitude of scorn and fear towards these physical practices,” as well as the ambivalent legacy of the premodern yogis in popular Indian imagination.²² However, it appears that so-called fakirs were still present in early colonial courts, sometimes offering medical advice.²³

As European Indologists sought to understand the religions and cultures of the Indian subcontinent, they prioritized philosophical presentations of yoga and *sāṃkhya* from Sanskrit texts and further marginalized the living practices of ascetics in the eyes of both Europeans and educated Indians.²⁴ In the 19th century, there was a contemporaneous idealization of the scriptural traditions of Indian spirituality in aspects of popular culture. The colonial Asiatic Society (founded in 1784) published an English translation of the Bhagavad Gītā (a section of the Mahābhārata) and selected Upanishads, which were well received by the educated public. Many German Indologists translated Sanskrit texts in the 19th century. German Romantics and American Transcendentalists were inspired by Indian texts in translation, creating what Raymond Swab termed the “Oriental Renaissance,” an idealization and celebration of Indian spirituality in European and American intellectual circles.²⁵ The

poet Edwin Arnold's English translation of the **Bhagavad Gītā**, *The Song Celestial* (1885), was successful among the wider literary public.²⁶

The esteem in which these translations were held on the world stage filtered back into the Indian discourses.²⁷ The **Bhagavad Gītā** offers many different paths to knowing God (in the form of Kṛṣṇa) and living in accordance with *dharma*. The three definitions of yoga found in the **Gītā** became particularly popular in the modern period: (1) "karma yoga," or the idea of union with the absolute through action without attachment to the results; (2) "bhakti yoga," or unceasing loving remembrance of God, and (3) "jñāna yoga," or a direct perception of the ultimate nature of reality through wisdom and insight. Readings of the **Bhagavad Gītā** have been subject to extensive interpretation and innovation, but its place as a central text of the contemporary yoga revival is based on its currency among the literate public in the 19th century. It has also been one of the most frequently read texts for those involved in the contemporary yoga revival during the 20th and early 21st centuries.²⁸

Toward the end of the 19th century, the Theosophical Society exalted the **Bhagavad Gītā** as a "Bible" of India. In 1975 founders of the Theosophical Society met in New York City to create a more universal, scientific religion, and the network of the society attracted many in Europe, India, and the Anglophile world who were disillusioned with institutional Christianity and interested in learning about other forms of religiosity and spirituality.²⁹ After an initial focus on spiritualism, the Theosophical Society relocated its headquarters to a suburb of Madras/Chennai in 1879 and published translations of select Sanskrit texts that became available for global Anglophile readers. The Theosophical translations identified the yogi with the **Gītā**'s description of one achieving realization of and "union with" God, as being

superior to, and oddly divorced from the living yogis, *sādhus*, and fakirs who could be found in India.³⁰

The Roots of the Yoga Renaissance: The Brahmo Samaj and Swami Vivekananda

The conceptual roots of the contemporary yoga revival appear in the reassertion or creation of a Hindu identity in the face of colonialism during the second half of the 19th century. Arguably, the most significant architect of revivalist yoga philosophy was Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), who was profoundly influenced by the Brahmo Samaj, a 19th-century Bengali movement that sought to re-present Indian religious traditions in a more modern form.

The Brahmo project, founded by Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) as the Brahmo Sabha in Calcutta in 1828, was created in dialogue with “western cultural models and values,” particularly a humanistic Unitarian Christianity, monotheistic theology, and a selective reading of the Upaniṣads through a lens of Vedāntic philosophy.³¹ The Samaj emphasized an ideal of active social service partially modeled on, and also as a local challenge to, Christian missionary activity. This new ideology was pejoratively described as “Neo-Vedanta” by Christian missionaries critical of the Hindu revival project.³² Although the descriptive term of choice is contested, the ideals of Indian religiosity articulated by the Samaj and its offshoots have been highly influential for the contemporary yoga revival in India and beyond.³³

Significantly for the history of yoga, Keshubchandra Sen (1838–1884) founded the splinter group “The Brahmo Samaj of India” in 1866 and began to reappropriate the idea of yoga into this influential new presentation of Hinduism. Sen was inspired

by his encounters with the Indian mystic Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886), who was widely considered to have a periodic absorption with the divine (*samadhi*). Sen promoted the idea that Hindus possessed a unique “yoga faculty,” or a “power of spiritual communion and absorption.”³⁴ It was through Sen’s Brahmo Samaj that Narendranath Datta, the future Swami Vivekananda, first encountered both yoga and Ramakrishna Paramahansa. It is clear that the articulation of the Indian traditions created by these late 19th-century Bengalis dramatically influenced what we can now identify as a yoga revival.

Swami Vivekananda has been arguably the name most associated with the contemporary yoga revival.³⁵ He was one of the first Hindu “missionaries” to the West who achieved a lasting legacy both in India and abroad. An upper-middle-class Bengali, the young Datta was educated by both a progressive Western-facing father and a reportedly pious Hindu mother. He was educated to be familiar with much of European philosophical thinking and spoke English well. As a young man, he was active with the Brahmo Samaj, and after the death of Sen in 1884 became increasingly involved with Ramakrishna, whom he came to regard as his guru. After Ramakrishna’s death in 1886, Vivekananda wandered India as a *sannyasin* (monastic renunciate) and eventually traveled to the United States in 1893.

In America, Vivekananda became connected with well-positioned intellectuals who sponsored him while he gave talks on philosophy and spirituality. After a successful reception at the Chicago Parliament of Religions (1893), which was covered in the national and international press, Vivekananda promoted Indian religiosity—and yoga more specifically—as a respectable area of personal interest for the middle classes of Europe and America. The international success of Vivekananda

as a representative of India and Hinduism abroad led to national success and admiration within India.

Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* (without commentary) were presented by Vivekananda as the foundational text of yoga, although academic comparison between Vivekananda and historical yoga traditions has revealed as much innovation as continuity.³⁶

Vivekananda adjusted Sen's "fourfold classification of devotees" into a "four yogas" scheme, presenting yoga as a form of Hinduism that was universalistic and accessible for the spiritual improvement of all mankind. The first of Vivekananda's yoga "types" is *Karma Yoga*, "the manner in which a man realizes his own divinity through works and duty." The second is *Bhakti Yoga*, "the realization of a divinity through devotion to and love of a personal God."³⁷ The third type Vivekananda termed *Rāja Yoga*, which he described as "the realization of divinity through control of the mind." He considered this to have been outlined by Patañjali in the *Yoga Sūtras* and to be the most superior of all forms of yoga. The fourth is *Gnana Yoga* (*Jñāna Yoga*), or "realization of man's own divinity through knowledge."³⁸ Above all, yoga was presented by Vivekananda as a process of self-realization, of manifesting "the Divinity within," which to him constitutes the essence of all religiosity.

Upon his return to India, Vivekananda focused more on social outreach and redefined institutional Indian religiosity on the principle of *seva* as an expression of Karma Yoga. The Ramakrishna Math and Mission, founded by Vivekananda shortly before his death, continues to have a significant and influential legacy in contemporary India. In a historical evaluation of the movement in India, Gwilym Beckerlegge describes the organization as a religious association whose "ultimate goals are spiritual but sought through extensive provision of service to humanity," with famine relief being an initial focus of its early activity.³⁹

In the second half of the 19th century, India suffered through eight major periods of famine, which was widely attributed to colonial mismanagement of supplies and exploitation of Indian resources. Vivekananda himself stopped short of directly criticizing British rule in his writings, but these writings articulated, and the Ramakrishna **Math and Mission** actualized, a powerful vision for a more active, spiritual, and materially self-supporting nation.⁴⁰ Within India, yoga became increasingly associated with all of the various elements of Vivekananda's project, not the least being an instilling of national pride and a model of material self-sufficiency predicated on an ideal of a uniquely Indian spiritual capability. As well as being influential in India, Vivekananda's description of yoga was circulated globally through Swami Sivananda's (1887–1963) prolific publishing and correspondence networks during the 20th century.⁴¹

The idea of “practical Vedanta” was also taken up by many other influential religious thinkers in India, religious virtuosi alternatively known as sannyasin, fakirs, and yogis. Other figures who became closely associated with a “yogic” vision of a positive Indian developmental trajectory included the Punjabis, Swami Rama Tirtha (1873–1906) and the *sādhu* Sundar Singh (1889–1929), who were both perceived as paradigms of Indian religious virtuosi and national pride.⁴²

Swadeshi Yoga—Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi

Aurobindo's influence on the contemporary yoga revival in India was also profound. The English-educated Bengali, Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), rose to prominence during the second Swadeshi (self-sufficiency) movement (1905–1911) which opposed the partition of Bengal into religious sections by the British Raj with

the aim of reducing opposition to colonial rule. A key aspect of this opposition was the boycott of British goods, as well as supporting the revival of Indian industries, an idea that has an older lineage, notably having been advocated by the highly influential Arya Samaj, founder Dayanand Saraswati (1824–1883), who also agitated for a revitalized, monotheistic Hinduism based on the authority of the Vedas. The Arya Samaj united with the Theosophical Society in India between 1878 to 1882, further increasing the influence of Dayanand Saraswati's ideas. The language of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal focused on making the struggle for self-rule in India a spiritual vision.

In these revolutionary years, Aurobindo was a persuasively eloquent polemicist, drawing upon the narrative of Kṛṣṇa's (Krishna's) descent as an *avatar* to engage in the battles of the world to inspire sacrifice in the name of a revolutionary utopian vision of Mother India. As early as 1905, Aurobindo expressed the dual life goals of encountering Divinity and liberating India from colonial rule.⁴³ He was imprisoned by the British for his revolutionary activities from 1908 to 1909 and held in solitary confinement. After his release, Aurobindo published an influential prison memoir in a series of articles, later republished as *Karakahini*, where he described a spiritual transformation that had taken place in prison and reaffirmed his vision of Indian *swaraj* (self-rule). He also published a journal entitled *Karmayogin* (1909–1910) where he united the ideal of adherence to duty as a means to spiritual awakening that Kṛṣṇa describes in the Bhagavad Gītā with the revolutionary struggle.

In 1910, however, Aurobindo retired from actively promoting swaraj to a self-imposed exile in the French colony of Pondicherry. There, he focused his intellect on the realization of divinity, creating a complex, evolutionary-focused vision of Integral Yoga. From around the period of World War I onward, Aurobindo articulated a

positive, evolutionary vision for both the individual and humanity as a whole, through a unique synthesis of what he saw as the highest spiritual thought across East and West. By 1926, he had become the focus of a group of devotees and, with the collaboration of French-born Mirra Alfassa, known as “The Mother,” established the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry.

The key work articulating Aurobindo’s vision, *The Life Divine* (1939), outlines an expansive and original metaphysical schema. He explains a tension between his mystical experience of Brahman and its incompatibility with the current state of the world in pain and suffering, outlining means by which individuals and society can actualize a utopian vision of human evolution into a state of divine harmony. The nature of Brahman, Aurobindo argues, is best described by the term *Satchitānanda*—a merging of *sat* (truth), *chit* (consciousness) and *ānanda* (bliss).⁴⁴ Aurobindo’s philosophy rests on his status as a religious mystic, which is predicated on being a “yoga practitioner” who achieved profound mystic insights after years of dedicated meditative practice. His optimistic and utopian vision for humanity, grounded in uniquely Indian spiritual concepts, has provided a template for visions of both yoga and further calls for *swadeshi*.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), often called “Mahatma” or “Great Soul,” is one of the most famous Indians, particularly for his nonviolent interventions toward founding an independent Indian nation-state. Gandhi also influenced the yoga revival in India in significant ways. Specifically, he continued the relationship outlined by Aurobindo (among others) between inner transformation and the creation of a more perfect material world. Although his spirituality was very personal, Gandhi embodied ideals of self-discipline and ethical restraint as being inseparable from the building of a self-reliant Indian nation. He continued the narrative of liberation

(*mokṣa*) via service (*seva*) that has become equated with the idea of Karma Yoga. Gandhi particularly and publicly focused on the ideals of *satya* (truth) and *ahimsa* (nonviolence), as well as vegetarianism and control of the senses. His focus on *brahmacharya* encompassed ideals of both sexual abstinence and fasting as being central. These are all part of the first set of ethical precepts (*yamas*) outlined in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*.

Many in India and abroad who were inspired by Gandhi's impressive self-discipline and leadership of the Swadeshi movement also looked toward yoga as a source of inspiration and guidance.⁴⁵ Gandhi's spiritual influences, though expressed in terms of *dharma*, were quite eclectic and included his mother's Pranami Vaishnavism, the Jainism prevalent in Gujarat, the **Bhagavad Gītā**, Christianity, theosophy, and, particularly, Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1894). Tolstoy's title, taken from the Gospel of Luke 17:21, was also a phrase commonly found among early 20-century yoga circles.

Secondly, Gandhi's conception of swadeshi encompassed an ideological critique of Western medicine, doctors, and hospitals that he saw as agents of colonial oppression, and dangerous due to their prescribing "violent symptomatic cures for specific illnesses rather than holistic therapies to remedy poor health."⁴⁶ For successful self-rule, Gandhi believed that Indians needed to be able to rely on their resources of body, mind, and soul—the development of the soul being dependent upon a healthy body and a well-disciplined mind that can overcome the temptations of the sensual world. The parallels with the yogic traditions did not go unnoticed by the revolutionary nationalists.⁴⁷

Gandhi also was very skeptical of Ayurveda, traditional Indian medicine, largely because he believed that it had become an elite, urban system of medicinal healing.

Joseph Alter argues that Gandhi's beliefs on health were based primarily on Western nature-cure traditions that were popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴⁸ But Gandhi also drew on the increasingly popular claims that yogic physical practices could promote health and well-being. In the late 1920s, he corresponded with Shripad Damodar Satwalekar (1867–1938), a fellow nationalist and authority on health and yoga and an author of a book on *Brahamacharya* (1924); he also consulted with Swami Kuvalayananda (1883–1966) (discussed further in the section “Yoga as Science and Public Health”) for yoga therapy. Satwalekar also appears to have had a relationship with Pant Pratinidhi, Rajah of Aundh, who advocated *sūrya namaskāra* for health (there is further discussion on *sūrya namaskāra* in the section “Yoga as Physical Culture”).⁴⁹ Gandhi advocated simple breathing exercises, based on yogic *prāṇāyāma*, for promoting a healthy constitution and moderate exercise, which could be accomplished by yoga-*āsana*.

Gandhi's uniquely influential vision, both antimodernist and anticolonialist, helped transform yoga into a system for promoting physical health, mental control, and an individual's duty to assert the truth of his or her Indian soul in the face of colonialism. His powerful connection of the health of the physical body, self-control, and self-restraint as important for overcoming colonial oppression helped to position yoga as a system of physical culture and therapeutics in 20th-century India. Partially due to Gandhi's influence in early postindependence India, yoga slowly came under the domain of the Ministry of Health, and it was often twinned with naturopathy in public health outreach programs.⁵⁰

Yoga as Physical Culture

There were many different presentations of Indian physical culture in the first half of the 20th century. This development was an Indian reaction to an international movement to revitalize physical culture, including bodybuilding, wrestling, and the revival of the Olympic Games in 1896. European populations had become concerned about the physical weakness of populations in newly urbanized, industrialized cities. The introduction of compulsory schooling in the 19th century was a perfect venue for improving working-class children's minds and bodies. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, narratives of Social Darwinism and eugenics became intertwined with calls for nationalism and military readiness. These narratives, largely of European origin, began to permeate Indian culture from both colonial powers and the Indian revolutionaries.

Indian nationalists began to call for the revitalization of the Indian body, through specifically Indian cultural traditions. The site of much of this 19th-century physical training was the *akhārā* (gymnasium). Here, the practice of yoga-*āsana* began to slip into the repertoire of Indic physical culture, which also included Indian martial arts, wrestling, warm-up exercises (*dands*), *sūrya namaskāra*, weight lifting of Indian clubs, *mallakhamba* (exercises on a pillar), and various drills.⁵¹ A particularly influential figure was Rajaratna Manikrao (1878–1954), who took over a successful *akhārā* upon the death of his guru Jummadada (about 1784–1904), who had trained him in martial arts, Unani medicine, and various languages. Manikrao renamed the *akhārā* in Vadodara, Gujarat Shree Jummadada Vyayam Mandir (a temple dedicated to his guru and physical education); thus, various Indian physical disciplines, including yoga-*āsana*, became explicitly linked to temple religiosity. Manikrao was a prolific writer in nationalist Gujarati newspapers, stressing the importance of Indian physical culture and becoming very popular locally. His revival of physical culture

was one of the influences on Sri Raghavendra Rao, who wrote under the name “Tiruka” and traveled around India in the early 1930s disseminating writings to inspire a new generation of yogi freedom fighters.⁵²

There were a number of significant Indian popularizers of yoga who were explicitly influenced by Western forms of physical culture and bodybuilding. These figures included Shri Yogendra (born Manibhai Haribhai Desai, 1897–1989), who was among the pioneers of the *āsana*-focused classes that soon became popular among the middle classes worldwide. Yogendra’s *Yoga Asanas Simplified* (1928) became a template for future yoga-*āsana* books; his system has been shown to be deeply influenced by the physical culturist Max Müller, among other Europeans.⁵³ Founded in 1918, Yogendra’s Yoga Institute at Santa Cruz (now a suburb of Bombay) was an early center for curative yoga therapy, catering largely to middle-class patrons. The ideology of Yogendra related general physical improvement with the potential for eugenic mutations to lead to a stronger national race.⁵⁴ But perhaps one of Yogendra’s lasting legacies was the normalization of a secularized yoga, primarily addressing the physical complaints of Indian householders, including women, while also referencing Patñjali’s *Yoga Sūtra* as the basis of this approach to yoga.⁵⁵

K. V. Iyer (1897–1980) was another influential figure who merged bodybuilding, physical culture, and yoga-*āsana* in his Bangalore-based gymnasium from 1922 onward. During the 1930s, Iyer’s student Sundaram (1901–1994) ran a Yogic School of Physical Culture and the two often collaborated in lecture–demonstration tours of India. Sundaram was a prolific author in Tamil and also active in the early Congress Party’s agitation for political independence. Another of Iyer’s students, Ramesh S. Balsekar (1917–2009), received extensive photographic coverage in the British physical culture magazine *Health and Strength* and included a number of yoga-*āsana*

as well as *sūrya namaskāra* exercises in his 1940 book **Streamlines* [<http://www.davidgentle.com/india/stream/index.html>]*.⁵⁶ After his retirement from business in 1977, Ramesh Balsekar became a Bombay-based international guru figure teaching Advaita philosophical insights.

A further influential figure is Bishnu Charan Ghosh (1903–1970), the younger brother of international yoga guru Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952). He was introduced to yogic physical culture at Yogananda’s Ranchi School for Boys in Bengal, and later he opened the Ghosh College of Yoga and Physical Culture in Calcutta in 1923, which continues its successful operation.⁵⁷ It was at Ghosh’s school that the international yoga guru Bikram Choudhury (b. 1946) was introduced to yoga; Bikram Choudhury went on to great popularity and financial success after moving to the United States in the 1970s, before facing a number of legal challenges relating to sexual misconduct and copyrights in the late 2000s.⁵⁸ For all these individuals, yoga could be seen as an exercise promoting general physical health, specific therapeutic interventions, improvement of the Indian nation, and spiritual liberation. These goals became interrelated through a multifaceted presentation of yoga, which encompassed, but should not be reduced to, an *āsana*-based practice.

Sūrya Namaskāra (sun salutations) became incorporated into contemporary yoga-*āsana* due to the influence of Bhawanrao Balasaheb Pant **Pratinidhi** (1868–1951), the Rajah of Aundh, a small state in Maharashtra (see Figure 1). In the 1920s onward, Pant worked with Shripad Damodar Satwalekar (a high-profile nationalist who, as previously mentioned, also had contact with Gandhi), to promote the exercise of *sūrya namaskāra* within his progressive educational program for the people under his governance and to create a civic body ready for self-governance.⁵⁹ In Joseph Alter’s assessment: “Over the past seventy years the history of *sūrya namaskāra* has

converged with the history of yoga as the latter has also developed into a form of physical training. But in Bhavanrao's conception, *sūrya namaskāra* was a form of bodybuilding and vigorous self-discipline more directly associated with ritual and spirituality.⁶⁰ In Bhavanrao's presentation, *sūrya namaskāra* was equally inspired by the Vedas and the physical culture movement in general; it merged effortlessly into the contemporary yoga revival, finding itself practiced in K. V. Iyer's gymnasiums by 1930, in the yoga-*āsana* guides of Swami Sivananda's *Yogic Home Exercises* (1939), in Vishnudevanana's *Complete Illustrated Book on Yoga* (1960), and as an appendix to B. K. S. Iyengar's encyclopedic *Light on Yoga* (1966).⁶¹

<COMP: INSERT FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE>

A final influential figure in redefining yoga in popular imagination as a largely physical-based practice was Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888–1989), whose innovations to yoga were largely immortalized by the global popularity of many of his students, particularly Indra Devi (1899–2002), B. K. S. Iyengar (1918–2014), K. Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009), and his son T. K. V. Desikachar (1938–2016). From 1933 to 1950, Krishnamacharya taught an evolving program of yoga-*āsana* at the Jaganmohan Palace in Mysore, under the patronage of the Maharaja of Mysore, Krishnaraja Wodiyar IV (1884–1940). Krishnamacharya was well versed in the traditional *darśanas*, having studied in Banaras and Patna University in Bihar and was originally engaged by the maharaja to teach philosophical subjects, including *mīmāṃsā*. However, Indian physical culture proved to be more popular, and Krishnamacharya was instructed by the maharaja to teach yoga-*āsana*.⁶² Wodiyar IV was a great patron of the early 20th-century physical-culture movement more generally, supporting K. V. Iyer, as well as Iyer's student H. Anant Rao, who ran a gymnasium in the same wing of the Jaganmohan Palace where Krishnamacharya

taught yoga-*āsana*. The maharaja also sent Krishnamacharya on various tours of India to promote yoga and physical culture.

Krishnamacharya was always interested in using *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* to improve health. After leaving Mysore to settle in Chennai, he pioneered a form of yoga therapy in prescribing breath and movement sequences for specific health problems. This tradition was continued by his son, T. K. V. Desikachar. Largely independent of Krishnamacharya's continued influence, B. K. S. Iyengar also developed his teaching of yoga-*āsana* toward meeting health and wellness concerns in the first instance, while also developing his own explorations on more soteriological aims of yoga. The influence that Krishnamacharya's students have had on the popular yoga revival in India has in many ways been indirect, with the mediated global presentations of *āsana* feeding back into the self-understanding of Indian practitioners from the late 20th century onward.⁶³

Yoga as Science and Public Health

The medical traditions of India have a rich history. In early Vedic literature, interventions of priests and the use of specific plants were associated with healing practices. From prior to the time of the Gautama **Buddha**, it is likely that wandering ascetics (*śramaṇa*) exchanged medical knowledge with one another.⁶⁴ In both oral traditions and some written sources, there is an overlap between the practices (and herbs) believed to develop magical powers (*siddhis*) and curative health benefits. Additionally, recipes for herbal medicines have circulated among *sādhus* in the modern period relating to the rejuvenate therapy of *kayakalpa*.⁶⁵ Wandering *sādhus* (also called *yogis*) may also at times offer medical cures to villagers, particularly

devotees with whom they have a preexisting connection.⁶⁶ Indian villagers are likely to hold skeptical attitudes to such *sādhus*, with much depending on a particular individual's local reputation. However, many Indians with various personal, financial, or physical troubles may approach them for “blessings” and other remedies.⁶⁷

Sriman Paramhansa Madhavdasji Maharaj (1798–1921), guru to both Shri Yogendra and Swami Kuvalyananda (1883–1966), was, according to oral tradition, a wandering *sādhu* for many years before settling in Malsar, Gujarat, where he offered health cures at an ashram in the early 20th century. The biographer of Shri Yogendra records that under Madhavdasji's guidance at the Malsar ashram, Yogendra was taught *āsana* (postures), *prāṇāyāma* (breathing exercises), *kriyā* (traditional cleansing techniques such as swallowing cloth), *bandhas* (locks), and dietary recommendations as therapeutic interventions.⁶⁸

In India, the monastic setting was an early site for the systemization of medical treatment, and Buddhist monasteries were particularly important for the systematization of Ayurveda.⁶⁹ However, the extent to which other Indian monastic environments offered health and healing services, including perhaps yogic techniques, to local populations in the early modern period is an unexplored area of research. Certainly, particular *sādhus* such as Madhavdasji gained reputations as being able to heal both mental and physical problems, and it appears that a kind of informal “sick bay” evolved at Madhavdasji's ashram in Malsar.⁷⁰

Madhavdasji's pupils Shri Yogendra (see the section “Yoga as Physical Culture”) and Swami Kuvalyananda were extremely influential in bringing yogic cures to scientific, biomedical analysis.⁷¹ Kuvalyananda was born Jagannath Ganesh Gune in Gujarat and studied at Baroda University where he was influenced by the nationalist Lokmanya Tilak (1856–1920), Sri Aurobindo, and physical culturalist Rajratan

Manikrao. Around 1919, Gune met Madhavdasji Maharaj and became particularly interested in exploring abilities acquired through yogic practice (*siddhis*) with Western scientific models.

In 1924, Gune was able to raise enough money to found a research center with the purpose of exploring yoga in scientific, physiological detail; this was the Kaivalyadhama Yoga Ashram in Lonavala, a hill city between Bombay and Pune. At this time, Gune adopted the name of Swami Kuvalyananda and began publishing the results of his research in *Yoga Mimamsa*, a journal that had both national and international influence. He opened the ashram to people seeking yoga as physical culture to improve health, and also to those seeking yoga as a therapeutic intervention for specific conditions, even including Gandhi as an early patient.⁷² From the late 1920s, the ashram was also conducting studies on classical Sanskrit texts. Kuvalyananda's work came to the attention of nationalist leaders as well as international researchers and attracted governmental sponsorship. The Kaivalyadhama Yoga Ashram and Kuvalyananda's innovative merging of Western science with disciplined teaching of yoga as physical culture, therapeutic intervention, and metaphysical soteriology had pervasive influence on further understandings of yoga.⁷³

Kuvalyananda's initiatives did much to institutionalize yoga therapeutics as part of the Indian national health-care system. In 1950, he founded, with a donation by Seth Makhanlal Seskaria, the Gordhandas Seskaria College of Yoga and Cultural Synthesis, and in 1962, the S. A. D. T. Gupta Yogi Hospital was established at the Kuvalyananda Marg in Lonavla, offering thirty-six beds for yogic treatment and scientific study with funding from the Maharashtra State Government and Shri A. T. Gupta. Kaivalyadhama continues as a center for both domestic and international

education, with a focus on yogic therapy, combined with naturopathy and preventative medicine.

<COMP: INSERT FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE>

After Indian independence, Ayurvedic practitioners campaigned for official state recognition and sponsorship, and yoga has gradually become understood as a “sister science” to Ayurveda.⁷⁴ The state sponsorship of Ayurveda, yoga, and other forms of indigenous and nonbiomedical medicine has been addressed in an uneven way since independence, with many regional variations.⁷⁵ After many years of inconsistent support, yoga became a named area of research in indigenous systems of medicine on the national level with the founding of the Central Council for Research in Indian Medicine and Homeopathy in 1970.⁷⁶ Yoga’s status as a form of indigenous medicine was further established and twinned with Naturopathy with the establishment of a separate Central Council of Research for Yoga and Naturopathy (CCRYN) in 1978. Today, “yoga therapeutics” holds a place in many government-sponsored hospitals and health-care centers. It is most frequently combined with naturopathy as a treatment model, but increasingly it is seen to overlap with Ayurveda and the category of indigenous or Indian medicine.⁷⁷ A Department of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy (AYUSH) was created within the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in 2003; it was raised to the level of an independent Ministry in November 2014. As is evident, the Indian government has been increasingly supportive of the development of AYUSH treatment within India, including yoga as a therapeutic intervention. As of 2016, the Indian government’s National Health Portal lists fifteen “Yoga Institutes” with contact details on its website.⁷⁸

The Yoga Revival in the Age of Globalization and Mass Media

Although the physical culture craze of the early 20th century somewhat declined in influence after independence, Indians continued to teach subjects called “yoga” in India and increasingly on the global stage. The idea of receiving spiritual insight through contact with a teacher (*guru*) is pervasive in Indian culture.⁷⁹ Many gurus are also understood as yogis, and the spiritual insights they offer are often presented as representing the essence of yoga.

During the 20th century, many different figures gained prominence, attracting devotees and forming both religious and social organizations in their names. In addition to some of the figures mentioned previously, other influential early 20th-century yoga gurus include Sai Baba of Shirdi (1835–1918),⁸⁰ Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950),⁸¹ Meher Baba (1894–1969), and Sri Anandamayi Maa (1896–1982) (see Figure 2).⁸² These gurus often underlined that their message of universal spiritual insight transcended mundane distinctions among religious traditions. Many individuals, both Indian and European, visited one or several of such renowned spiritual virtuosi, seeking their own insight and healing from a variety of physical and emotional problems.

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An early innovator in global communications of yoga was Swami Sivananda (1887–1963) and his Divine Light Society, which was founded in 1936. Originally a biomedical doctor, turned *sannyasin* in Rishikesh, Sivananda continued to represent intertwined ideals of health and spiritual development that were becoming associated

with yoga in India during the early 20th century. He was a prolific publisher and letter writer, and the Divine Light Society's publishing house churned out cheaply produced pamphlets and books on yoga that were distributed globally.

Sivananda's vision of yoga was eclectic, offering varying definitions of "self-realization," "God-realization" and "realizing the Immortal Atman" as the purpose of yogic striving. His literature emphasized meditation practices over *āsana*, but *āsana* became a stronger part of the Sivananda lineage over time.⁸³ Although not directly agitating for independence, Sivananda supported the idealization of Gandhi as a model yogi.⁸⁴ In many ways, Sivananda continued Vivekananda's categories of yoga, with Sarah Strauss arguing that Sivananda's injunctions to "Serve, Love, Meditate, Realise" roughly parallel Vivekananda's four paths of yoga.⁸⁵ Sivananda's disciples, particularly Swami Vishnudevananda (1927-1993) who settled in Montreal, Canada, in 1959 and helped establish a global following, oversaw the opening of Sivananda Yoga Centres worldwide. The Bihar School of Yoga founded in 1964 by another of Sivananda's disciples, Swami Satyananda Saraswati (1923–2009) also achieved an influential position both within India and internationally.

Following the lead of Vivekananda's *seva*-oriented Ramakrishna Math and Mission, the ethic of *seva* has become an almost ubiquitous part of contemporary yoga ashram activities. The provision of food, health, and educational resources is widespread among contemporary Indian religious organizations, many of which claim associations with yoga.⁸⁶

This service mission is also exemplified by the Vivekananda Kendra founded in 1972 by the Indian nationalist leader Eknath Ramkrishna Ranade (1914–1982). The Kendra conducts yoga camps as part of its mission to provide spiritual and practical uplift to the masses of India.⁸⁷ Eknath Ranade was previously a member of the

Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsēvaka Saṅgha (RSS), a Hindu-nationalist organization formed in 1925 to instill discipline and selfless service to the creation of a Hindu nation-state.⁸⁸ The RSS is organized into branches (*śākhā*) that organize local volunteers into various activities, including physical fitness drills (which include yoga *āsana*), first-aid training, and various charitable and social activities. The promotion of yoga as uniquely Hindu by the RSS has been seen as threatening to other faith groups within India. A variety of other India nationalist-oriented organizations have also used the popularity of yoga as a component of their activities for promoting health and self-discipline and for instilling a spiritual worldview. The organization of large yoga camps (*shivir*) for both specific populations and the general public is now common.⁸⁹

The leaders of the newly independent Indian nation often expressed interest in promoting yoga and Indian forms of health and well-being in various capacities. The first prime minister of independent India and an associate of Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), was widely reported to have been influenced by the Bhagavad Gītā and to practice yoga-*āsana*. In the 1970s, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1917–1984) was closely associated with Dharendra Brahmachari (1924–1994), who promoted the benefits of yoga in a weekly broadcast on Doordarshan, the state-owned television network. Brahmachari also introduced yoga as physical culture to many state-owned schools in the Delhi area. Harbhajan Singh Puri, popularly known as Yogi Bhan (1929–2004), who attended Brahmachari’s yoga classes in New Delhi in the 1960s, went on to found Kundalini Yoga in America.⁹⁰ Brahmachari was a controversial figure, attracting criticism for what was seen as an inappropriately intimate relationship with Indira Gandhi, as well as for an eccentric and lavish ashram at Mantalai and various business and land deals that were later ruled illegal.⁹¹ The reputation of Brahmachari highlights a continued feeling of ambivalence within India

toward yogis, and acknowledgment that many apparent “God men” can be fraudulent and abuse their power over devotees.⁹²

The rise of global media accelerated the ascent of the international guru figure, epitomized by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s (1918–2008) success in attracting the world’s most famous music band, The Beatles, as devotees for a short period in 1967. The Maharishi himself came from an orthodox Advaita Vedānta background, being the administrative secretary to the Śāṅkarācārya of Jyotir Math, Swami Brahmānanda Sarasvatī (1868–1953) during the 1940s. The Maharishi’s copyrighted form of “Transcendental Meditation” was promoted as yoga in the 1970s; later, his organizations began to promote branded “Maharishi Ayurved” medicines to their devotees and those seeking alternatives to biomedicine. Other Indian yoga teachers influenced by this lineage include Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (b.1956), who operates highly successful ashrams and wellness programs under the name of The Art of Living Foundation.⁹³ Many of these international gurus emphasize the language of universal spirituality, influenced by centuries of international exchange and English-language dominance, which Srinivas Aravamudan has aptly analyzed as *Guru English* (2006).

Other Indian yoga gurus who have attracted considerable interest within India and the Indian diaspora include Mātā Amṛtānandamayī (b. 1953), widely known as Amma, or “mother,” and the “hugging saint,”⁹⁴ and Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011).⁹⁵ Beatle George Harrison’s later association with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) further popularized the Gaudiya Vaishnavite revival begun by Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī (1874–1937) in Bengal and the vision of Krishna-focused *bhakti yoga* throughout India.⁹⁶ The contemporary yoga revival goes beyond groups identifying as Hindu, with recent scholarship also highlighting the revival of yoga within the Jain Shvetāmbara Terāpanth.⁹⁷ There are complex relationships

between the international (often Anglophile) branches of the guru-led organizations and more local structures, which are often conducted in regional languages.

Perhaps the most ubiquitous face of the yoga revival in contemporary India is Swami Ramdev (b. 1971?).⁹⁸ The first signs of Ramdev's establishment of himself as a major yoga guru were with the founding of the Divya Yoga Mandir (Trust) with his business associate Balkrishna around 1995. Remembered by locals as walking around Haridwar distributing pamphlets about the benefits of yoga and Ayurveda, Ramdev developed his system of teaching yoga between 1995 and 2002.⁹⁹ In 2003, he began teaching yoga for a commercial, spiritually focused channel called Aastha TV. At the end of 2007, Vedic Broadcasting Limited, managed by Ramdev's business partner Balkrishna, took ownership of the channel. In 2011, all but one of the ten most popular religious programs in India were broadcast on Aastha TV, and the top three shows were all by Baba Ramdev.¹⁰⁰ Those affiliated with Ramdev have suggested that more than four billion people watch his morning yoga television programs worldwide. He has been described as India's "most popular tele-healer" and is often described as a "household name" by the press in India.¹⁰¹

In addition to his television shows, Ramdev conducts very large *shivir* (huge public yoga classes) and authorizes teachers to teach under his name locally. At his mass yoga camps with thousands of participants, individuals practice *prāṇāyām* and *āsana*, which can also be done with limited personal space and mobility. And through a teacher-training system, The Patanjali Yog Samiti claims to run 50,000 free yoga classes every day "in nook and corner" throughout India.¹⁰² Ramdev's headquarters, the Patanjali Yogpeeth in Haridwar, Uttarakhand, provides both allopathic and Ayurvedic medical care and promotes research into the medical benefits of yoga and Ayurveda. Ramdev also runs a large business with Balkrishna that produces Patanjali-

branded Ayurvedic medicine. He promotes a form of capitalist *swadeshi*, moving into Indian-produced food, noodles, and even jeans under the Patanjali brand, promoting freedom from foreign multinational corporations.¹⁰³ His strongest base of support appears to be among the Hindi-speaking lower-middle classes in the West and North of India and the diaspora, but he has also attracted support from a wide range of Indian society.¹⁰⁴

Ramdev is well known for making controversial public statements and championing Indian national interests. He presents himself as a plain-talking, down-to-earth spiritual leader who is unafraid to say what needs to be said. In 2011, he gained extensive coverage for his public rallies, demanding that the Indian government crack down on corruption and lost tax revenue; in 2013, after threatening to become directly involved in politics, Ramdev endorsed Narendra Modi (b. 1950) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for the office of Indian prime minister.

The response of the Indian government to the contemporary yoga revival has been largely to embrace all yoga that can be seen as exemplary form of Indian culture, while protecting traditional knowledge from neocolonial poaching, such as yoga-
āsanas, which are considered a uniquely Indian cultural resource. To this end, yoga-
āsana and other Indian medical knowledge have been included in the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL), established in 2001 to prevent the patenting of knowledge that belongs to Indian cultural traditions.¹⁰⁵ In 2015, the Indian government also offered official recognition to yoga as a sport.¹⁰⁶

The Multivalent Revival of Yoga in Contemporary

India

Yoga is certainly experiencing a revival in contemporary India. The first International Day of Yoga, with an internationally sponsored resolution at the United Nations, was celebrated on June 21, 2015. In his proposal for this day, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi explained to the United Nations:

Yoga is an invaluable gift of India's ancient tradition. It embodies unity of mind and body; thought and action; restraint and fulfillment; harmony between man and nature; a holistic approach to health and well-being. It is not about exercise but to discover the sense of oneness with yourself, the world and nature.¹⁰⁷

Although minority groups in India are uncomfortable with the association of yoga and Hindutva ideology, it is clear that many groups that do not self-identify as Hindu also have practices they understand as yoga. Yoga is a multivalent term covering a diverse collection of ideas and practices. In contemporary India, yoga has strong associations as a religious ideal, as well as an activity that can promote health and wellness. Yoga is also associated with nationalistic ideology, international gurus, evidence-based biomedical health benefits, secular physical culture, and purely individual aspirations for *mokṣa*.

Review of the Literature

An academic focus on something that could be identified as a contemporary yoga revival occurred relatively recently, with the term “Modern Yoga” introduced by Elizabeth De Michelis in *A History of Modern Yoga* (2004). In the same year, Joseph Alter published *Yoga in Modern India*, which outlined some of the significant influences of biomedical paradigms on yoga in colonial India; it followed up on his

previous work on somatic aspects of Indian nationalism and Gandhi. This was followed by Mark Singleton's 2010 book *Yoga Body*, which elucidated the extent to which Western ideas of physical culture influenced contemporary practices of yoga, especially the emphasis on physical postures (*āsana*).

Another body of literature has emphasized the role of consumerism and transnationalism in transforming modern yoga, for example, Andrea R. Jain's *Selling Yoga* (2014), which complements the previous analysis of yoga in neoliberal, consumerist societies by Jeremy Carrette and Richard King in *Selling Spirituality* (2004) and Kimberly A. Lau in *New Age Capitalism* (2000).¹⁰⁸ These monographs tend to support an implicit idea of a continuous yoga tradition that is somehow transformed, or reinvented, in different times and places.

Much of the existing research paradigm also dialogues with the paradigm of the invention of tradition.¹⁰⁹ Some contemporary research can be seen as attempting to uncover novel modern innovations termed “yoga” that are discontinuous with more traditional India practices. This is echoed in the concerns of Hindutva politicians and spokespeople both in India and in the diaspora that the forms of yoga popular in gyms and promoted by celebrities debase the pure and ancient tradition of yoga that is sacred to Indians.¹¹⁰ The contemporary yoga revival obviously involves a spectrum of people that range from ascetics to highly successful businessmen and a huge variety of organizations that have various positions in this milieu.¹¹¹

Agehananda Bharati's description (1970) of how Indians reemphasize aspects of their culture that have been acclaimed by “Westerners” has also been extremely influential in literature on the contemporary yoga revival, and remains an underlying paradigm of most historical analysis. Bharati proposes that officially, from the colonial period to the present,

Western things are not desirable in the Indian cultural universe; but neither are the themes and the works of the tradition which is thought reactionary and obsolete. Yet, one and all, they gather momentum and respect through a process of re-enculturation. I have coined the facetious-sounding term "pizza-effect" for this pervasive pattern.¹¹²

As Bharati explains in his footnote:

The original pizza was a simple, hot-baked bread without any trimmings, the staple of the Calabrian and Sicilian contadini from whom well over 90% of all Italo-Americans descend. After World War I, a highly elaborated dish, the U.S. pizza of many sizes, flavors, and hues, made its way back to Italy with visiting kinsfolk from America. The term and the object have acquired a new meaning and a new status, as well as many new tastes in the land of its origin, not only in the south, but throughout the length and width of Italy.¹¹³

In contrast, recent anthropological work has emphasized reciprocal global relationships and the importance of networks coalescing around internationally touring Indian gurus. Yoga is often only a part of the “package” of these contemporary Indian gurus, which includes health care, a community in which to belong, and a meaningful worldview. The term *yoga* often features in various ways as defining the group’s soteriological goals, and the practice of physical postures and *prāṇāyāma* is also a ubiquitous feature. This approach began with Sarah Strauss’s multisited ethnography on the development of Sivananda Yoga in India, Germany, and the United States, which elegantly illustrates the transnational movement of an influential practice (2005).¹¹⁴ This is complemented more recently by Véronique Altglas’s multisited sociological research on Siddha and Sivananda Yoga centers in

Britain and France, which concentrates on demographics of those who are attracted to the globalized forms of the contemporary yoga revival.¹¹⁵ Transnational exchange and networks were also the theoretical focus of a 2013 edited volume by Beatrix Hauser, Amanda Lucia's work on Amma, the hugging guru, and Smriti Srinivas's work on Sathya Sai Baba.¹¹⁶

In the field of anthropology and history, Nāth sampradayas have received quite a lot of ethnographic and historical research as phenomena largely distinct from the contemporary yoga revival.¹¹⁷ However, recent ethnography has shown that contemporary Nāths have been influenced by the popularity of āsana, and more recently have been incorporating more of these techniques into their interactions with the public.¹¹⁸

Beyond the foundational works mentioned, there are extensive resources in the case study approach found in monograph-length biographies, academic journals, and edited volumes. There is a rich literature here for anyone seeking to get an overview of the myriad presentations of yoga in the contemporary world.¹¹⁹ Recent research has also begun to focus on the visual culture of India in the premodern period as providing evidence for various physical practices.¹²⁰

In 2015, two ambitious research projects were funded by the European Research Council that aim to take a *longue durée* view of yoga over the past thousand years. The first is the Hatha Yoga Project, which will primarily extend the accessibility of historical research with attention to manuscripts, but also contains an ethnographic element of interviews with contemporary *sādhus*. The second major research project, Ayuryog, is looking at overlaps among yoga, Ayurveda, and *rasaśāstra* (Indian alchemy and iatrochemistry) from the 10th to the 21st centuries, focusing on the

disciplines' health, rejuvenation, and longevity practices. It is likely that the literature in this field will be considerably more diverse by 2020.

Primary Sources

Research to date has largely been done by Anglophone academics, with a bias toward English language sources. The digitalization of historical newspapers since 2000 has opened up research avenues for examining regional popularization of yoga in distinct localities.

For those with competency in the regional languages of India, there is much research to be done articulating the relationship between vernacular literature and local revival movements. The relationship between these local Indian regions and the development of yoga is a neglected area of research; collections of vernacular newspapers have yet to be digitized, and oral history research could still yield interesting new insights when connected to the international narrative on the contemporary yoga revival.

While most of the influential actors for the revival of yoga have been identified, the significance of many other secondary figures, associated with specific spheres of regional influence, has yet to be touched.

Links to Digital and Visual Materials

Websites

- [*Entangled Histories of Yoga, Ayurveda and Alchemy in South](http://ayuryog.org/)

[Asia](http://ayuryog.org/)[http://ayuryog.org/]*

This European Research Council funded project (2015–2020) examines the histories of yoga, Ayurveda, and rasaśāstra (Indian alchemy and iatrochemistry) from the

10th to the 21st centuries, focusing on the disciplines' health, rejuvenation, and longevity practices. The goals of the project, which is based at the University of Vienna, are to reveal the entanglements of these historical traditions, and to trace the trajectories of their evolution as components of the global health-care and personal development industries.

- *[The Hatha Yoga Project \(HYP\)](http://hyp.soas.ac.uk/)[http://hyp.soas.ac.uk/]*

The Hatha Yoga Project (HYP) is a five-year research project (2015–2020) funded by the European Research Council and based at SOAS, University of London, which aims to chart the history of physical yoga practice by means of philology, that is, the study of texts on yoga, and ethnography, that is, fieldwork among practitioners of yoga. The project team consists of four researchers based at SOAS, one at the École française d'Extrême Orient, Pondicherry, and one at the Maharaja Man Singh Pustak Prakash, Jodhpur. The project's primary outputs will be critical editions and annotated translations of ten Sanskrit texts on hatha yoga, four monographs, and a range of journal articles, book chapters, and encyclopedia entries.

- *[The Hartsuiker Archive](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx?searchText=Hartsuiker)[

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx?searchText=Hartsuiker\]](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx?searchText=Hartsuiker)*

This archive, held at the British Museum in London, documents Indian mendicants or *sādhus*, mostly Hindu, but including some Jain practitioners, in the later 20th century in northern India. The images were taken by Adolphus Hartsuiker over many years, from the 1970s onward.

- *[Modern Yoga Research Website](http://www.modernyogaresearch.org/)[http://www.modernyogaresearch.org/]*

This Website highlights research into modern yoga and, more generally, about some of the most informative research on earlier forms of yoga. This site's contributors are typically university academics engaged in teaching, and in the professional study of forms of modern yoga and/or of South Asian history, culture, and languages. This Website highlights some of those who are active in these areas of research and access, in several; cases via direct downloads, and some of their most relevant contributions.

- *[Yoga: The Art of Transformation](http://www.asia.si.edu/explore/yoga/default.asp)[http://www.asia.si.edu/explore/yoga/default.asp]*

Online resource related to the exhibition *Yoga: The Art of Transformation* held during 2013–2014 at the Freer Gallery of Art/Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. United States. This Website provides examples of the visual culture of yoga history. The exhibition's 133 works, which were created over two millennia, range from devotional sculptures and illustrated court manuscripts to colonial photographs and early films.

Videos

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- *[Video of Baba Ramdev](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7z9tPMZJSUU)[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7z9tPMZJSUU]*. Available on YouTube.
- *[Video of Narendra Modi](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyPZGhA-rMU)[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyPZGhA-rMU]* participating in International Yoga Day at Rajpath, June 21, 2015. Available on YouTube.

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<<CAPT>>**Figure 1. Indian Navy personnel perform *sūrya namaskāra*, described as yoga on board INS Sunayna on June 21, 2015. Photo by the Indian Navy.**

<<CAPT>>**Figure 2. Sri Anandamayi Ma in the early 20th century. Photo by anonymous follower.**

Notes

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